Exceeding Great and Precious Promises

"Whereby are given unto us exceeding great and precious promises: that by these ye might be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust."
—II Peter 1:4

IN THIS SCRIPTURE, THE Apostle Peter brings to our attention the 'exceeding great and precious promises' that are assured to those who suffer and die with Jesus. When these faithful have experienced their change of nature from fleshly to spiritual in the resurrection, they will receive the blessed promise to live and reign with our Lord Jesus during the thousand years of his kingdom of Truth and righteousness. Together the church, head and body, will share in the blessing of all mankind and bring the sin-sick and dying world back to relationship with God.

Concerning this wonderful prospect the apostle further 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 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 [for us, *Marginal Translation*]."—I Pet. 1:3,4

Those who will share this rulership of the kingdom with our Lord will first have to experience the change in nature even as Jesus did. He gave his flesh, his humanity, for the "life of the world." (John 6:51) It was this sacrifice of his human life that provided redemption for the world of mankind, and which will assure all an opportunity to regain life during the time of Christ's kingdom. (I Tim. 2:3-6) Having been put to death in the flesh, Jesus was raised from the dead as a glorious Divine being with all power given to him in heaven and earth.—Heb. 1:1-4

It is these promises which have been misunderstood, and have led to the erroneous belief that all of mankind who are saved through that faith in Jesus Christ will spend eternity in heaven. However, this is not the thought at all. The heavenly promises were only offered to the footstep followers of Jesus, those who willingly deny themselves and take up their cross and follow him into sacrificial death. (Matt. 16:24) They are not invited to sacrifice their lives in order to attain salvation, but to prove worthy of living and reigning with Christ in that glorious heavenly kingdom of promise—the kingdom which is to establish peace on earth and provide health and joy and everlasting life for the human family who obey its righteous laws.

This exaltation to heavenly glory is what Jesus meant by being "born of the Spirit." (John 3:5,6)

While every true follower of the Master is in this life begotten to this heavenly hope, it is not until the resurrection that spirit birth takes place. This is in keeping with Jesus' explanation that those who are 'born of the Spirit' are, even as the wind, invisible to human eyes, and powerful. Together with Jesus, this class, called from the world and proven faithful during the present age, will constitute the spiritual phase of the Messianic kingdom. In the parable of the wheat and tares, Jesus speaks of these as "children of the kingdom," and explains that they shall "shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father."—Matt. 13:25-30,36-43

THE HEAVENLY KINGDOM

The invitation to follow in the footsteps of Jesus, and to thus qualify for joint-heirship in his kingdom, is extended to his followers during this present Gospel Age through the wonderful provision of redemption that has been provided through faith in Jesus. Jesus explained that only by the denial of self could anyone become his disciple. "Then said Jesus unto his disciples, If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me."—Matt. 16:24

The narrow way of sacrifice was not actually opened to his followers until Pentecost. This was after the death and resurrection of Jesus, and after he had presented the merit of his sacrifice on behalf of his church members who respond to the spiritual calling during this acceptable time. This is further explained by the Apostle Paul when he wrote, "Christ is not entered into the holy places made with hands, which are the figures of the true; but into heaven

itself, now to appear in the presence of God for us."—Heb. 9:24

Jesus had promised Peter that he would give him the keys to the kingdom of heaven, so it was Peter who proclaimed the glad tidings and officially opened the door into the kingdom. (Matt. 16:19) This was first of all given on behalf of believers to the nation of Israel. Later, it was again Peter who also was the first to proclaim the Gospel of the kingdom to the Gentiles. This was in the home of Cornelius, the first Gentile convert. (Acts 10:34,36,44,45) It was Peter who used the keys of the kingdom in carrying forth the ultimate plan of God for the reconciliation, and recovery from sin and death, of the human family.

This did not mean that the kingdom of heaven was established at Pentecost, but it simply meant that there began the selection of those who are to share with Jesus in his future kingdom in blessing all the families of the earth. The keys Peter used at that time were keys for the opportunity of Gentile believers to obtain joint rulership in the heavenly kingdom with Christ. The way into this high position in the kingdom is a difficult one, and Paul said that it is through "much tribulation" that anyone can enter into the spiritual kingdom.—Acts 14:22

Those who are called by God to this highly exalted position in Christ's kingdom are not, as a rule, the great, the mighty, or the noble of this world; although there is no particular discrimination against these. It is merely that in their present positions of honor and authority the terms of the narrow way may seem too costly. In this connection, we read, "Hearken, my beloved brethren, Hath not God chosen the poor

of this world rich in faith, and heirs of the kingdom which he hath promised to them that love him?" (James 2:5) But whether rich or poor, small or great according to the standards of this world, Jesus taught that all must become as humble, innocent children in order to enter into the heavenly kingdom. Of such he said, "Verily I say unto you, Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven." (Matt. 18:3) It is important to note that Jesus was not saying here that the kingdom would be made up of young children, but that they must be humble and teachable like little children.

JOHN THE BAPTIST

Jesus said, "Among them that are born of women there hath not risen a greater than John the Baptist: notwithstanding he that is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he." (Matt. 11:11) Here, as in so many other instances in the Scriptures, Jesus uses the expression, 'kingdom of heaven' to denote the spiritual, or heavenly phase, of that glorious government of promise that is eventually to reign over and bless all nations. John the Baptist will have a part in the earthly phase of that kingdom. John was born and died before Jesus laid down his life, thus opening the "new and living way."—Heb. 10:20

We learn from the Scriptures that "The law and the prophets were until John: since that time the kingdom of God is preached." (Luke 16:16) In connection with the Law which was given at Mt. Sinai, and the rewards which were offered to the people of Israel for their obedience to it, the LORD said, "If

ye will obey my voice indeed, and keep my covenant, then ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto me above all people: for all the earth is mine: And ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests, and an holy nation. These are the words which thou shalt speak unto the children of Israel." (Exod. 19:5,6) The nation as a whole did not qualify for this promised position as a kingdom of priests; but the prophets and other faithful ones as individuals did qualify. The ancient patriarchs, although not under the written Law, were faithful to the precepts it proclaimed, and God will make good his promise to them.

All of these Ancient Worthies served God loyally because they had faith in the Messianic kingdom promises, although God did not hold out to them the hope of the heavenly kingdom. Their expectation was to be restored to life as humans on the earth. Paul lists many of them in the eleventh chapter of Hebrews, and tells of their suffering for righteousness' sake, and explains that they endured and died, believing that they would have a better resurrection. (Heb. 11:35,39,40) That better resurrection will be to human perfection and to a position of teachers and leaders among the people here on earth.—Isa. 1:26

Jesus said to the people of Israel in his day that they would see their prophets, including John the Baptist—the last of the prophets—in the kingdom of God, and they as a nation being thrust out. We read, "He shall say, I tell you, I know you not whence ye are; depart from me, all ye workers of iniquity. There shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth, when ye shall see Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, and all the prophets, in the kingdom of God, and you yourselves thrust out. And they shall come from the east,

and from the west, and from the north, and from the south, and shall sit down in the kingdom of God. And, behold, there are last which shall be first, and there are first which shall be last."—Luke 13:27-30

The children of the kingdom, those who by faithfulness to the Law could have qualified to be a kingdom of priests when raised from the dead, will be greatly disappointed when they realize that they do not occupy this honored position. Their disappointment is described by the expression, 'weeping and gnashing of teeth.' But Jesus explained who among them will occupy that position. It will be the Ancient Worthies—Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and all the prophets. The people will go to them in the sense of recognizing them as the representatives of the Messianic kingdom which will then be in control of earth's affairs.

These will comprise the earthly phase of the kingdom of Christ. We are told that they will be made "princes in all the earth." (Ps. 45:16) While John the Baptist will not be with Jesus in the heavenly phase of the kingdom, he will be one of these earthly princes who will represent the heavenly rulers—Christ, and those who faithfully suffered and died by following in his steps of self-sacrifice.

Thus the organizational arrangements of the kingdom of Christ will be complete. Its personnel, in both the heavenly and earthly phases, will have been tested and trained in advance, and raised from the dead to take their positions as rulers and teachers in that glorious kingdom of Truth and righteousness. Jesus was the first to be raised from the dead, and throughout the present Gospel Age he has supervised the calling and training of his joint-heirs.

He has served as their Advocate at the throne of heavenly grace, and has been their Good Shepherd, their Counselor and Guide. He has been their Lord, Master, and Head. When the work of calling and training his joint-heirs has been completed, and when their resurrection from the dead and exaltation to the Divine nature is accomplished, then will come to pass the better resurrection of their human representatives—the worthies of old. These two phases of the kingdom will be working together, harmoniously and gloriously, during the future long-promised kingdom.

There will also be a great multitude of spiritual servants in Christ's kingdom. These we are told will be before the throne, not on the throne, not rulers in the kingdom. While the Scriptures do not specifically state just how these will serve, it will be as liaison between the heavenly and earthly phases of the kingdom. This great multitude is described in Revelation 7:9,10,13-17

This complete and perfectly organized kingdom, or government, is symbolically described by Micah the prophet as the "mountain of the house of the LORD," the 'mountain' being a symbol of the kingdom, and the 'house' as God's ruling family, or ruling power. (Mic. 4:1) In this prophecy the two phases of the kingdom are symbolized as Zion the spiritual, and Jerusalem the earthly. The prophecy also states that in the last days the "mountain of the house of the LORD shall be established in the top of the mountains, . . . and people shall flow unto it." (vs. 1) The Prophet Isaiah, in a similar prophecy writes, "It shall come to pass in the last days, that the mountain of the LORD'S house shall be established

[prepared, *Marginal Translation*] in the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills; and all nations shall flow unto it. And many people shall go and say, Come ye, and let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; and he will teach us of his ways, and we will walk in his paths: for out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem."—Isa. 2:2,3

This wonderful prophecy continues, "He shall judge among the nations, and shall rebuke many people: and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruninghooks: nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more." (vs. 4) How evident it is from this that the kingdom of Christ will exercise a powerful control over the affairs of men, even to the rebuking of strong nations which do not, at first, bow the knee to its righteous rulership. As a result of learning the Lord's ways under the rulership of Christ's kingdom, and if necessary being rebuked or disciplined in the process, the nations will no longer learn war.

SUBJECTS OF THE KINGDOM

In addition to the kingdom of Christ having both a spiritual and an earthly phase, it also has both rulers, and those who are ruled—the subjects. It is important in the study of the Bible to note this distinction, and when Jesus promised his disciples that they would be with him in his kingdom, the reference is to the ruling aspect of the kingdom, that they would be "kings and priests" in the kingdom with him.—Rev. 5:10; 20:4,6

Jesus, during his kingdom reign, will restore the paradise conditions that originally existed in the Garden of Eden, throughout the whole earth. Our first parents disobeyed God's law and suffered the penalty of death. But the will or law of God will be reestablished under the administration of Christ's kingdom, and life will be restored to the obedient human family. The whole earth will then become as the Garden of Eden in a perfected earth, and filled with the restored and perfected human race. These will be subjects of the kingdom, and what happy subjects they will be!

Using a mountain to symbolize the kingdom, the Prophet Isaiah also wrote that in this mountain the LORD would destroy even death itself. He says, "In this mountain shall the LORD of hosts make unto all people a feast of fat things, a feast of wines on the lees, of fat things full of marrow, of wines on the lees well refined. And he will destroy [swallow up, *Marginal Translation*] in this mountain the face of the covering cast over all people, and the vail that is spread over all nations. He will swallow up death in victory; and the Lord GOD will wipe away tears from off all faces; and the rebuke of his people shall he take away from off all the earth: for the LORD hath spoken it. And it shall be said in that day, Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, and he will save us: this is the LORD; we have waited for him, we will be glad and rejoice in his salvation."—Isa. 25:6-9

Those who have died will be awakened from death and given an opportunity to enjoy the life-giving blessings of the kingdom. We are assured of this by the Apostle Paul when he described the resurrection

of the faithful class who receive the spiritual reward. In reference to this, he points to Isaiah's prophecy. "Then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written, [Isa. 25:8] Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?"—I Cor. 15:54,55

This will be the great work of Christ's kingdom. Paul also explains that Christ will reign until all enemies are destroyed. "He must reign, till he hath put all enemies under his feet. The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death." (vss. 25,26) In this glorious work of the kingdom, Jesus' followers, those who have been faithful to their spiritual calling, will share with our Lord in this time of blessing. Daniel the prophet said, "The kingdom and dominion, and the greatness of the kingdom under the whole heaven, shall be given to the people of the saints of the most High, whose kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and all dominions [rulers, *Marginal Translation*] shall serve and obey him." (Dan. 7:27) It is also the kingdom foretold by the Revelator where we read, "The kingdoms of this world are become the kingdoms of our Lord, and of his Christ; and he shall reign for ever and ever."—Rev. 11:15

While many centuries have gone by in the preparation for this kingdom, when the time finally arrives for it to be established it will surely accomplish all that God has promised. Its setting up will mark the time for the resurrection of the dead, when the saints of this age are exalted to reign with Christ in the spiritual phase of the kingdom, and when the worthies of old will be made 'princes in all the earth.'

At that time, the whole world will be enlightened, and all will learn to love and reverence the LORD. Those who continue willfully to oppose God and righteousness will be destroyed from among the people. Then the work of the kingdom will be com-pleted, and through the agencies of the kingdom all will have been brought to the complete fulfillment of every Christian's prayer, "Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven." (Matt. 6:10) No prayer that has ever been offered will have had a more complete and glorious answer. ■