

The Christian Hope Is Of An Everlasting Kingdom.

We must never lose sight of the fact that the 'hope' (confident certainty) of the people of God is for an everlasting kingdom, and that that is what the New Testament message is all about. As Paul himself declared, 'The Lord will preserve me to His heavenly kingdom' (2 Timothy 4.18). We are reminded by this that Paul's eyes were fixed on only one goal, 'the upward calling of God in Christ Jesus' (Philippians 3.14). He looked, with Peter, for a new heaven and a new earth (2 Peter 3.13). That is why he could go on to say, 'our manner of living is in heaven from where also we look for the Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will change our weak human body, that it might be fashioned like to His glorious body, according to the working by which He is able even to subdue all things to Himself' (Philippians 3.21). He was looking for 'a kingdom which cannot be moved' (Hebrews 12.28). No millennial kingdom for him.

Peter shared the same hope in every way. He says to his Christian readers, 'An entrance will be ministered to you abundantly into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ' (2 Peter 1.11). Again there is no thought here of any so-called 'millennium kingdom'. The kingdom described by Peter will commence in heaven under God's Kingly Rule, where His people will reign with Him 'over the earth' (Ephesians 2.6; Revelation 5.10; 20.4) and will be continued in 'the new heaven and the new earth in which dwells righteousness' (2 Peter 3.13; compare Revelation 21.1). Furthermore it will be there that Abraham will find all the promises made to him fulfilled. God had promised Abraham 'this land' (Genesis 12.7), and his descendants and the descendants of his servants (tribal members) did indeed inherit that same land, they were there when our Lord Jesus Christ came into the world, but Hebrews 11.10-14 stresses that the final fulfilment of this promise will occur not in an earthly country but in a heavenly one to which 'this land' will have been transferred. It will be in 'the new heaven and earth' that God will create (the first heaven and the first earth will have passed away - Revelation 21.1). We are told that Abraham was not looking to establish anything solid on this earth, because 'he looked for a city which has foundations whose builder and maker is God' (Hebrews 11.10). He 'died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off, and was persuaded of them and embraced them' confessing that he was 'a stranger and pilgrim in the earth' (Hebrews 11.13). Thus he and his descendants 'desired a better country, even a heavenly' (Hebrews 11.14). It was in that heavenly country that their hopes are to be fulfilled.

And this everlasting kingdom, of which we have a foretaste now by the working of the Holy Spirit (Romans 14.17) and also when we die and go to be 'with Christ, which is far better' (Philippians 1.23), will find its final fulfilment in the new heavens and the new earth when the 'righteous will shine forth like the sun in the kingdom of their father' (Matthew 13.3).

It is the same everlasting kingdom as was promised by the prophets. 'David My servant will be king over them, and they will all have one shepherd, and they will walk in My judgments and observe My statutes and do them, and they will dwell in the land which I have given to Jacob My servant, in which your fathers have dwelt -- and My servant David will be their prince FOR EVER. Moreover I will make a covenant of peace with them, and it will be an EVERLASTING covenant with them, and I will place them and multiply them and will set My sanctuary in the midst of them FOR EVERMORE. My dwellingplace will be with them --- when My sanctuary will be in the midst of them FOR EVERMORE' (Ezekiel 37.24-28). We do not need to argue about the meaning of individual Hebrew words. The tenor of the passage is quite apparent. It is clearly looking, not at some limited period of time, but at the unceasing future. The whole point is that it will not be temporary but will go on for ever.

The first thing to note here is the everlastingness of that kingdom, and the everlastingness of the dwelling of God with His people, something constant in both the Old and the New Testaments. This dwelling of God with His people in this way is described in Revelation 21.22-23; 22.3-5, and is clearly to be for evermore. It will indicate that the final goal has been

reached. It will quite rightly be pointed out by some that the verses also speak of 'dwelling in the land which I gave to My servant Jacob in which your fathers have dwelt'. Surely, they will say, this must therefore relate to living on earth. But if we take that view there is an apparent contradiction, for nothing is more certain than that land on this earth will NOT go on for ever. It is in fact specifically said that it will be destroyed. 'The first earth and the first heaven will pass away' (Revelation 21.1; 20.11). What then is the Scriptural explanation to this dilemma (rather than the explanation of men)? It is that the new heaven and the new earth are such that they are seen as a continuation of this heaven and earth. As we saw from Hebrews above, while it is true that Abraham's descendants did inherit the actual land that Abraham was standing on, under the Zerubbabel, the son of David, it is in that new earth that Abraham and Jacob will have the promises of the land to them fulfilled under the eternal Son of David. It is seen in God's eyes as the same land even though it is in the new earth. And that new earth IS EVERLASTING.

<p> The same thing is true of so much Old Testament prophecy. The prophets were looking ahead trying to express the everlasting hope in the only terms that they knew, that of the earth in which they lived. They were not laying down some prophetic timetable or speculating about the future, but were rather looking beyond everything to the certainty of the final fulfilment of God's purposes, doing it in terms that the people could understand (they had then no conception of even the possibility of a heavenly kingdom). But Peter makes clear that their message was finally to us. 'Of which salvation (eternal salvation) the prophets have enquired and searched diligently, who prophesied of the grace COMING TO YOU, searching what, or what manner of time the Spirit of Christ signified, when it testified beforehand the sufferings of Christ and 'the glory which would follow', to whom it was revealed, that NOT TO THEMSELVES BUT TO US, they ministered the things which are now reported to you by those who preach the Gospel to you with the Holy Spirit sent down from heaven' (1 Peter 1.10-12). Thus Peter makes clear that the prophets were writing to us. But some prophetic preachers want us to think that the message was NOT for us. They speak of a prophetic clock stopping ticking, as though the message was not to us. And thereby they deny Scripture in order to support their exegesis. However, either the prophets spoke or us or they did not. We have no Scriptural authority to have it both ways.

<p> The problem, of course, arises from the failure of many to understand that at any time the message that God gives has to be given in the context of people's thinking at the time, whether it be in days of old or to us. When speaking to those who lived in Old Testament days He catered for their weakness and lack of understanding. Thus He spoke to those who thought only in terms of this earth in the terms in which they thought and in the light of the aspirations that they had. To have spoken about a heavenly kingdom would have been confusing, for to them the heavenly kingdom as spoken of by people round about them, was a world of the gods. That danger was avoided by portraying the future in earthly terms. But in order not to be unfair to them we must recognise that He has also in fact do the same for us. He speaks in terms reminiscent of this earth. Thus when He speaks of heavenly thrones and suchlike He is not speaking about what Heaven is really like, but is speaking in 'earthly' terms, in order to convey the idea of authority and power. For God is Spirit. He has no length and breadth. He does not sit on a throne. The heavenly world is spiritual. Nor can we have any real conception of what the new heaven and the new earth will be like after we have been given spiritual bodies (1 Corinthians 15.44). The ideas are being conveyed in earthly terms so that we can gain some understanding of the situation. But flesh and blood will not inherit the kingdom of God (1 Corinthians 15.50), and 'now we see through a glass darkly' (1 Corinthians 13.12). But on the other side we will have a totally different conception of things and will recognise how difficult it was for God to convey to us genuine truth, and we will recognise that only He could have done it, and that He had to do it in terms that we could understand.

<p> While then we can have no real conception of what living in the everlasting kingdom will

be like, (there will not really be streets of gold), what we must do is accept the earthly pictures (as the ancients also did) and absorb the glory of what is being described. It will be a glory beyond telling. And it is one that we will enjoy for ever.