EXPOSITORY THOUGHTS
ON THE GOSPELS.

FOR FAMILY AND PRIVATE USE.

WITH THE TEXT COMPLETE,
And many Explanatory Notes.

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JOHN XI. 7-16.

7 Then after that saith he to his disciples, Let us go into Judæa again.
8 His disciples say unto him, Master, the Jews of late sought to stone thee; and goest thou thither again?
9 Jesus answered, Are there not twelve hours in the day? If any man walk in the day, he stumbleth not, because he seeth the light of this world.
10 But if a man walk in the night, he stumbleth, because there is no light in him.
11 These things said he: and after that he saith unto them, Our friend Lazarus sleepeth; but I go, that I may awake him out of sleep.
12 Then said his disciples, Lord, if he sleep, he shall do well.
13 Howbeit Jesus spake of his death: but they thought that he had spoken of taking of rest in sleep.
14 Then said Jesus unto them plainly, Lazarus is dead.
15 And I am glad for your sakes that I was not there, to the intent ye may believe; nevertheless let us go unto him.
16 Then said Thomas, which is called Didymus, unto his fellow-disciples, Let us also go, that we may die with him.

WE should notice, in this passage, how mysterious are the ways in which Christ sometimes leads His people. We are told that when He talked of going back to Judæa, His disciples were perplexed. It was the very place where the Jews had lately tried to stone their Master: to return thither was to plunge into the midst of danger. These timid Galileans could not see the necessity or prudence of such a step. “Goest Thou thither again?” they cried.

Things such as these are often going on around us. The servants of Christ are often placed in circumstances just as puzzling and perplexing as those of the disciples. They are led in ways of which they cannot see the purpose and object; they are called to fill positions from which they naturally shrink, and which they would never have chosen for themselves. Thousands in every age are continually learning this by their own experience. The path they are obliged to walk in is not the path of their own choice. At present they cannot see its usefulness or wisdom.

At times like these a Christian must call into exercise his faith and patience. He must believe that his Master knows best by what road His servant ought to travel, and that He is leading him, by the right way, to a city of habitation. He may rest assured that the circumstances in which he is placed are precisely those which are most likely to promote his graces and to check his besetting sins. He need not doubt that what he cannot see now he will understand hereafter. He will find one day that there was wisdom in every step of his journey, though flesh and blood could not see it at the time. If the twelve disciples had not been taken back into Judæa, they would not have seen the glorious miracle of Bethany. If Christians were allowed to choose their own course through life, they would never learn hundreds of lessons about Christ and His grace, which they are now taught in God’s ways. Let us remember these things. The time may come when we shall be called to take some journey in life which we greatly dislike. When that time comes,
let us set out cheerfully, and believe that all is right.

We should notice, secondly, in this passage, *how tenderly Christ speaks of the death of believers*. He announces the fact of Lazarus being dead in language of singular beauty and gentleness: “Our friend Lazarus sleepeth.”

Every true Christian has a Friend in heaven, of almighty power and boundless love. He is thought of, cared for, provided for, defended by God’s eternal Son. He has an unfailing Protector, who never slumbers or sleeps, and watches continually over his interests. The world may despise him, but he has no cause to be ashamed. Father and mother even may cast him out, but Christ having once taken him up will never let him go. He is the “friend of Christ” even after he is dead! The friendships of this world are often fair-weather friendships, and fail us like summer-dried fountains, when our need is the sorest; but the friendship of the Son of God is stronger than death, and goes beyond the grave. The Friend of sinners is a Friend that sticketh closer than a brother.

The death of true Christians is “sleep,” and not annihilation. It is a solemn and miraculous change, no doubt, but not a change to be regarded with alarm. They have nothing to fear for their souls in the change, for their sins are washed away in Christ’s blood. The sharpest sting of death is the sense of unpardoned sin. Christians have nothing to fear for their bodies in the change; they will rise again by and by, refreshed and renewed, after the image of the Lord. The grave itself is a conquered enemy. It must render back its tenants safe and sound, the very moment that Christ calls for them at the last day.

Let us remember these things when those whom we love fall asleep in Christ, or when we ourselves receive our notice to quit this world. Let us call to mind, in such an hour, that our great Friend takes thought for our bodies as well as for our souls, and that He will not allow one hair of our heads to perish. Let us never forget that the grave is the place where the Lord Himself lay, and that as He rose again triumphant from that cold bed, so also shall all His people. To a mere worldly man death must needs be a terrible thing; but he that has Christian faith may boldly say, as he lays down life, “I will lay me down in peace, and take my rest: for it is Thou, Lord, that makest me dwell in safety.”

We should notice, lastly, in this passage, *how much of natural temperament clings to a believer even after conversion*. We read that when Thomas saw that Lazarus was dead, and that Jesus was determined, in spite of all danger, to return into Judæa, he said, “Let us also go, that we may die with Him.” There can only be one meaning in that expression: it was the language of a despairing and desponding mind, which could see nothing but dark clouds in the picture. The very man who afterwards could not believe that his Master had risen again, and thought the news too good to be true, is
just the one of the twelve who thinks that if they go back to Judæa they must all die!

Things such as these are deeply instructive, and are doubtless recorded for our learning. They show us that the grace of God in conversion does not so re-mould a man as to leave no trace of his natural bent of character. The sanguine do not altogether cease to be sanguine, nor the desponding to be desponding, when they pass from death to life, and become true Christians. They show us that we must make large allowances for natural temperament, in forming our estimate of individual Christians. We must not expect all God’s children to be exactly one and the same. Each tree in a forest has its own peculiarities of shape and growth, and yet all at a distance look one mass of leaf and verdure. Each member of Christ’s body has his own distinctive bias, and yet all in the main are led by one Spirit, and love one Lord. The two sisters Martha and Mary, the apostles Peter and John and Thomas, were certainly very unlike one another in many respects. But they had all one point in common: they loved Christ, and were His friends.

Let us take heed that we really belong to Christ. This is the one thing needful. If this is made sure, we shall be led by the right way, and end well at last. We may not have the cheerfulness of one brother, or the fiery zeal of another, or the gentleness of another. But if grace reigns within us, and we know what repentance and faith are by experience, we shall stand on the right hand in the great day. Happy is the man of whom, with all his defects, Christ says to saints and angels, “This is our friend.”

NOTES. JOHN XI. 7-16.

7.—[Then after that saith...disciples.] The Greek words which begin this sentence mark an interval of time even more emphatically than our English version does. They would be literally rendered, “Afterwards, after this.” The word translated “then” “is the same that is translated “after that” in 1 Cor. xv. 6-7.

[Let us go...Judæa again.] This is the language of the kind and loving head of a family, and the chief in a party of friends. Our Lord does not say, “I shall go to,” or, “Follow Me to Judæa,” but, “Let us go.” It is the voice of a kind Master and Shepherd proposing a thing to His pupils and followers, as though He would allow them to express their opinions about it. How much depends on the manner and language of a leader!

The familiar, easy manner in which our Lord is said here to tell His disciples what He proposes to do, gives a pleasant idea of the terms on which they lived with Him.

8.—[His disciples say...Master.] The answer of the disciples is an interesting illustration of the easy terms on which they were with their Master. They tell him frankly and unreservedly their feelings and fears.

Let it be noted that the word rendered “Master” here is the well-known word “Rabbi.” The use of it shows that there is nothing necessarily insulting, sneering, or discourteous about the term. It was the title of honour and respect given by all Jews to their teachers. Thus John the Baptist’s disciples said to him, when jealous for his honour, “Rabbi, he that was with thee,” etc. (John iii. 26.)

[The Jews of late sought to stone thee.] The “Jews” here mean especially the leaders or
principal persons among the Scribes and Pharisees at Jerusalem, as it generally does in St. John’s Gospel. The word rendered “of late” is generally translated “now,” or “at this time.” There is not another instance of its being translated “of late” in the New Testament. Hence the sentence would be more literally rendered, “The Jews even now were seeking to stone Thee.” They allude to the attempt made at the feast of dedication a few weeks before. The attempt was so recent that it seemed “even now.”

[And goest thou thither again?] This question indicates surprise and fear,—“Do we hear aright? Dost Thou really talk of going back again to Judæa? Dost Thou not fear another assault on Thy life?” We can easily detect fear for their own safety, as well as their Master’s, in the question of the disciples: yet they put it on “thee,” and not on “us.”

Let us note how strange and unwise our Lord’s plans sometimes appear to His short-sighted people. How little the best can understand His ways!

9, 10.—[Jesus answered, Are there not twelve hours, etc.] The answer which our Lord makes to the remonstrance of His timid disciples is somewhat remarkable. Instead of giving them a direct reply, bidding them not to be afraid, He first quotes a proverbial saying, and then draws from that saying general lessons about the time which any one who is on a journey will choose for journeying. He draws no conclusion, and leaves the application to be made by the disciples themselves. To an English ear the answer seems far more strange than it would to an Eastern one. To quote a proverb is, even now, a common reply among Orientals. To fill up the sense of our Lord’s elliptical reply, and draw the conclusions He meant to be drawn, but did not express, is, however, not very easy. The following may be taken as a paraphrase of it:—

“Are not the working hours of the day twelve? You know they are, speaking generally. If a man on a journey walks during these twelve daylight hours, he sees his road, and does not stumble or fall, because the sun, which is the light of the world, shines on his path. If, on the contrary, a man on a journey chooses to walk in the unreasonable hour of night, he is likely to stumble or fall, for want of light to guide his feet. It is even so with Me. My twelve hours of ministry, my day of work, is not yet over. There is no fear of my life being cut off before the time: I shall not be slain till my work is done. Till mine hour is come I am safe, and not a hair of my head can be touched. I am like one walking in the full light of the sun, and cannot fall. The night will soon be here when I shall walk on earth no longer: but the night has not yet come. There are twelve hours in my day of earthly ministry, and the twelfth with Me has not arrived.”

This seems to me substantially the correct explanation of our Lord’s meaning. The idea of ancient writers, as Hugo and Lyranus, that our Lord meant, by mentioning the twelve hours of the day that men often change their minds as the day goes on, and that the Jews, perhaps, no longer wished to kill Him, is very improbable and unsatisfactory.

I grant that the conclusion of the tenth verse, “there is no light in him,” presents some difficulty. The simplest explanation is, that it only means, “because he has no light.”

Pearce conjectures that the clause should be rendered, “Because there is no light in it; viz., the world.” The Greek will perhaps bear this interpretation.

Let us note that the great principle underlying the two verses is the old saying in another form, “Every man is immortal till his work is done.” A recollection of that saying is an excellent antidote against fears of danger. The missionary in heathen lands, and the minister at home, pressed down by unhealthy climate, or over-abundant work, may take comfort in it, after their Lord’s example. Let us only, by way of caution, make sure that our dangers meet us in the path of duty, and that we do not go out of the way to seek them.

Rupertus suggests that our Lord had in His mind His own doctrine, that He was the
Light and Sun of the world. Now as the sun continues shining all the twelve hours of the day, and no mortal power can stop it, so He would have the disciples know that until the evening of His own course arrived, no power of the Jews could possibly check, arrest, or do Him harm. As to the disciples, He seems to add, “So long as I am shining on you with my bodily presence, you have nothing to fear, you will not fall into trouble. When I am taken from you, and not till then, you will be in danger of falling into the bands of persecutors, and even of being put to death.” Ecolampadius takes the same view.

Melancthon thinks that our Lord uses a proverbial mode of speech, in order to teach us the great broad lesson that we must attend to the duties of our day, station, and calling, and then leave the event to God. In the path of duty all will turn out right. Calvin, Bullinger, Gwalter, and Brentius, take much the same view.

Leigh remarks: “Christ comforts from God’s providence. God made the day twelve hours. Who can make it shorter? Who can shorten man’s life?”

Does it not come to this, that our Lord would have the disciples know that He Himself could not take harm till His day of work was over, and that they could take no harm while He was with them? (Compare Luke xiii. 32, 33.) Bishop Ellicott suggests that this was the very time in our Lord’s ministry when He said to the Pharisee, “I do cures to-day and to-morrow, and the third day I shall be perfected. Nevertheless I must walk today and to-morrow and the day following.” But I doubt this.

It is certain that there came a time when our Lord said, “This Is your hour, and the power of darkness,” to His enemies. Then He was taken, and His disciples fled.

11.—[These things...our friend Lazarus...sleepeth.] In this verse our Lord breaks the fact, that Lazarus is dead, to His disciples. He does it in words of matchless beauty and tenderness. After saying “these things” about the twelve hours of the day, which we have considered in the last verse, He seems to make a slight pause. Then, “after that,” comes the announcement, which would be more literally rendered, “Lazarus, the friend of us, has been laid asleep.”

The word “sleepeth” means, “is dead.” It is a gentle and pathetic way of expressing the most painful of events that can befall man, and a most suitable one, when we remember that after death comes resurrection. In dying we are not annihilated. Like sleepers, we lie down, to rise again. Estius well remarks, “Sleeping, in the sense of dying, is only applied to men, because of the hope of the resurrection. We read no such thing of brutes.”

The use of the figure is so common in Scripture, that it is almost needless to give references. (See Deut. xxxi. 16; Daniel xii. 2; Matt. xxvii. 52; Acts vii. 60; xiii. 36; 1 Cor. vii. 39; xi. 30; xv. 6-18; 1 Thess. iv. 13, 14.) But it is a striking fact that the figure is frequently used by great heathen writers, showing clearly that the tradition of a life after death existed even among the heathen. Homer, Sophocles, Virgil, Catullus, supply instances. However, the Christian believer is the only one who can truly regard death as sleep,—that is, as a healthy, refreshing thing, which can do him no harm. Many among ourselves, perhaps, are not aware that the figure of speech exists among us in full force in the word “cemetery,” applied to burial-ground. That word is drawn from the very Greek verb which our Lord uses here. It is literally a “sleeping-place.”

The word “friend,” applied to Lazarus, gives a beautiful idea of the relation between the Lord Jesus and all His believing people. Each one is His “friend,”—not servant, or subject only, but “friend.” A poor believer has no cause to be ashamed. He has a Friend greater than kings and nobles, who will show Himself friendly to all eternity. A dead saint lying in the grave is not cut off from Christ’s love: even in his grave, he is still the friend of Christ.

The expression “our,” attached to friend, teaches the beautiful lesson that every friend
of Christ is or should be the friend of all Christians. Believers are all one family of brothers and sisters, and members of one body. Lazarus was not “my” friend, but “our” friend. If any one is a friend of Christ, every other believer should be ready and willing to hold out his hand to him, and say, “You are my friend.”

When our Lord says, “I go that I may awaken him out of sleep,” He proclaims His deliberate intention and purpose to raise Lazarus from the dead. He boldly challenges the attention of the disciples, and declares that He is going to Bethany, to restore a dead man to life. Never was bolder declaration made. None surely would make it but One who knew that He was very God.

“I go,” is equivalent to saying, “I am at once setting forth on a journey to Bethany.” The expression, that “I may awake him out of sleep,” is one word in Greek, and is equivalent to “that I may unsleep him.” What our Lord went to do at Bethany, He is soon coming to do for all our friends who are asleep in Christ. He is coming to awaken them.

Some commentators have thought that Lazarus died in the very moment that our Lord said, “Our friend sleepeth,” and that it means, “Lazarus has just fallen asleep and died.” But this is only conjecture, though doubtless our Lord knew the moment of his decease.

Let it be noted that our Lord says, “I go,” in the singular number, and not “Let us go.” Does it not look as if He meant, “Whether you like to go or not, I intend to go?”

Hall remarks: “None can awaken Lazarus out of this sleep, but He that made Lazarus. Every mouse or gnat can raise us up from that other sleep; none but an omnipotent power from this.”

12.—[Then said...disciples...sleep...well.] It seems strange that the disciples should misunderstand our Lord’s words, considering how commonly death was called sleep. But their unwillingness to go into Judea probably made them shut their eyes to our Lord’s real meaning.

Most writers think that the disciples referred to the general opinion, that sleep in sickness is a sign of amendment. Some, however, suggest that they had gathered from the messenger sent by Martha and Mary what was the precise nature of Lazarus’ illness, and therefore knew that it was one in which sleep was a favourable symptom.

The Greek word for “he shall do well,” is curious. It is the same that is often rendered “shall be made whole.” Sometimes it is “healed,” and generally “saved.”

The latent thought is manifest: “If Lazarus sleeps, he is getting better, and there is no need of our going to Judea.”

13.—[Howbeit Jesus spake, etc.] This verse is one of those explanatory glosses which St. John frequently puts into his narrative parenthetically. The three first words of the verse would be more literally rendered, “But Jesus had spoken.”

How the disciples could have “thought” or “supposed” that our Lord meant literal sleep, and not death, seems strange, when we remember that Peter, James, and John, had heard Him use the same expression after the death of the ruler’s daughter: “The maid sleepeth.” (Matt. ix. 24.) Two probable reasons may be assigned: one is that they had heard from the messenger that Lazarus’ recovery turned on his getting sleep, and that if he only got some sleep he might do well; the other is that they were so afraid of returning to Judea, that they determined to believe Lazarus was getting better, and to construe our Lord’s words in the way most agreeable to their fears. It is common to observe that men will not understand what they do not want to understand.

Quesnel remarks here: “The misunderstanding of the Apostles was a great instance of stupidity, and shows plainly how sensual and carnal their minds still were. The knowledge of this is useful in order to convince incredulous persons that the Apostles were not of
themselves capable either of converting the world, or of inventing the wonderful things and sublime discourses which they relate.”

The readiness of the disciples to misunderstand figurative language is curiously shown in two other places, where our Lord spoke of “leaven” and “meat.” (Matt. xvi. 6; John iv. 32.)

14.—[Then said...plainly...Lazarus...dead.] Here at last our Lord breaks the fact of Lazarus’ death to His disciples openly, and without any farther reserve. He had approached the subject gently and delicately, and thus prepared their minds for something painful, by steps. First He said simply, “Let us go into Judæa,” without assigning a reason. Secondly He said, “Lazarus sleepeath.” Lastly He says, “Lazarus is dead.” There is a beautiful consideration for feelings in these three steps. It is a comfortable thought that our mighty Saviour is so tenderhearted and gentle. It is an instructive lesson to us on the duty of dealing gently with others, and specially in announcing afflictions.

The word rendered “plainly” is the same as in John x. 24. Here, as there, it does not mean “in plain, intelligible language” so much as “openly, unreservedly, and without mystery.”

15.—[And I am glad...not there...believe.] This sentence would be more literally rendered, “And I rejoice on account of you, in order that ye may believe, that I was not there.” Our Lord evidently means that He was glad that He was not at Bethany when Lazarus became ill, and had not healed him before his death, as in all probability He would have done. The result now would be most advantageous to the disciples. Their faith would receive an immense confirmation, by witnessing the stupendous miracle of Lazarus being raised from the dead. Thus, great good, in one respect, would come out of great evil. The announcement they had just heard might be very painful and distressing, but He as their Master could not but be glad to think how mightily their faith would be strengthened in the end.

Let us note that our Lord does not say, “I am glad Lazarus is dead, but I am glad I was not there.” Had He been there, He seems to say, He could not have refused the prayer of Martha and Mary to heal His friend. We are not intended to be so unfeeling as to rejoice in the death of Christian friends; but we may rejoice in the circumstances attending their deaths, and the glory redounding to Christ, and the benefit accruing to saints from them.

Let us note that our Lord does not say, “I am glad for the sake of Martha and Mary and Lazarus that I am not there, but for your sakes.” It is no pleasure to Him to see His individual members suffering, weeping, and dying; but He does rejoice to see the good of many spring out of the suffering of a few. Hence He permits some to be afflicted, in order that many may be instructed through their afflictions. This is the key to the permission of evil in the world; it is for the good of the many. When we ourselves are allowed of God to suffer, we must remember this. We must believe there are wise reasons why God does not come to our help at once and take the suffering away.

Let us note our Lord’s desire that His disciples “may believe.” He did not mean that they might believe now for the first time, but that they might believe more firmly, heartily, and unhesitatingly; that their faith, in short, might receive a great increase by seeing Lazarus raised. We see here the immense importance of faith. To believe on Christ, and trust God’s word, is the first step towards heaven. To believe more and trust more, is the real secret of Christian growth, progress, and prosperity. To make us believe more is the end of all Christ’s dealings with us. (See John xiv. 1.)

[Nevertheless let us go unto him.] The first word here would be more literally rendered “But.” It is as though our Lord said, “But let us delay no longer; let us cast aside all fears of danger; let us go to our friend.”
It is noteworthy that our Lord says, “let us go to Lazarus,” though he was dead, and would be buried by the time they reached Bethany. Can it be that the disciples thought He had David’s words about his dead child in His mind, “I shall go to him”? The words of Thomas, in the next verse, seem to make it possible.

We may notice three gradations in our Lord’s language about going to Bethany. The first, in the 7th verse: there He says in the plural, “Let us all go into Judæa.”—The second, in verse 11: there He says in the singular, “I go to awake him;” as though He was ready to go alone.—The third is here in the plural, “Let us all go.”

Toletus thinks that by these words our Lord meant to hint His intention of raising Lazarus.

Burkitt remarks: “O love, stronger than death! The grave cannot separate Christ and his friends. Other friends accompany us to the brink of the grave, and then they leave us. — Neither life nor death can separate from the love of Christ.

Bengel remarks: “It is beautifully consonant with Divine propriety, that no one is ever read of, as having died while the Prince of Life was present.”

16.—[Then said Thomas...go...die with him.] The disciple here named is also mentioned in John xiv. 5, and John xx. 24, 26, 27. On each occasion he appears in the same state of mind,—ready to look at the black side of everything,—taking the worst view of the position, and raising doubts and fears. In John xiv. 5, he does not know where our Lord is going. In John xx. 25, he cannot believe our Lord has risen. Here he sees nothing but danger and death, if his Master returns to Judæa. Yet he is true and faithful nevertheless. He will not forsake Christ, even if death is in the way. “Let us go,” he says to his fellow-disciples, “and die with our Master. He is sure to be killed if He does go; but we cannot do better than be killed with him.”

Some, as Brentius, Grotius, Leigh, Poole, and Hammond, think that “with him,” refers to Lazarus. But most commentators think that Thomas refers to our Lord; with them I entirely agree.

Let it be noted that a man may have notable weaknesses and infirmities of Christian character, and yet be a disciple of Christ. There is no more common fault among believers, perhaps, than despondency and unbelief. A reckless readiness to die and make an end of our troubles is not grace but impatience.

Let us observe how extremely unlike one another Christ’s disciples were. Peter, for instance, overrunning with zeal and confidence, was the very opposite of desponding Thomas. Yet both had grace, and both loved Christ. We must not foolishly assume that all Christians are exactly like one another in details of character. We must make large allowances, when the main features are right.

Let us remember that this same Thomas, so desponding in our Lord’s life-time, was afterwards the very Apostle who first preached the Gospel in India, according to ecclesiastical history, and penetrated farther East than any whose name is recorded. Chrysostom says, “The very man who dared not go to Bethany in Christ’s company, afterwards ran alone through the world, and dwelt in the midst of nations full of murder and ready to kill him.”

Some have thought that his Greek name “Didymus,” signifying “two” or “double,” was given him because of his character being double, viz., part faith and part weakness. But this is very doubtful. In the first three Gospels, in the catalogue of the twelve, he is always named together with Matthew the publican. But why we do not know.

The Greek word for “fellow-disciple” is never used in the New Testament excepting here.