

EXPOSITORY THOUGHTS  
ON THE GOSPELS.

FOR FAMILY AND PRIVATE USE.

WITH THE TEXT COMPLETE,  
And many Explanatory Notes.

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JOHN VIII. 31.-36.

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| <p>31 Then said Jesus to those Jews which believed on him, If ye continue in my word, <i>then</i> are ye my disciples indeed;</p> <p>32 And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.</p> <p>33 They answered him, We be Abraham's seed, and were never in bondage to any man: how sayest thou, Ye shall be made free?</p> | <p>31 Jesus answered them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Whosoever committeth sin is the servant of sin.</p> <p>35 And the servant abideth not in the house for ever: <i>but</i> the Son abideth ever.</p> <p>36 If the Son therefore shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed.</p> |
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THESE verses show us, for one thing, *the importance of steady perseverance in Christ's service*. There were many, it seems, at this particular period, who professed to believe on our Lord, and expressed a desire to become His disciples. There is nothing to show that they had true faith. They appear to have acted under the influence of temporary excitement, without considering what they were doing. And to them our Lord addresses this instructive warning: "If ye continue in my word, then are ye my disciples indeed."

This sentence contains a mine of wisdom. To make a beginning in religious life is comparatively easy. Not a few mixed motives assist us. The love of novelty, the praise of well-meaning but indiscreet professors, the secret self-satisfaction of feeling "how good I am," the universal excitement attending a new position,—all these things combine to aid the young beginner. Aided by them he begins to run the race that leads to heaven, lays aside many bad habits, takes up many good ones, has many comfortable frames and feelings, and gets on swimmingly for a time. But when the newness of his position is past and gone, when the freshness of his feelings is rubbed off and lost, when the world and the devil begin to pull hard at him, when the weakness of his own heart begins to appear,—then it is that he finds out the real difficulties of vital Christianity. Then it is that he discovers the deep wisdom of our Lord's saying now before us. It is not beginning, but "continuing" a religious profession, that is the test of true grace.

We should remember these things in forming our estimate of other people's religion. No doubt we ought to be thankful when we see any one ceasing to do evil and learning to do well. We must not "despise the day of small things." (Zech. iv. 10.) But we must not forget that to begin is one thing, and to go on is quite another. Patient continuance in well-doing is the only sure evidence of grace. Not he that runs fast and furiously at first, but he that keeps up his speed, is he that "runs so as to obtain." By all means let us be hopeful when we see anything like conversion. But let us not make too sure that it is real conversion, until time has set its seal upon it. Time and wear test metals, and prove whether they are solid or plated. Time and wear, in like manner, are the surest tests of a man's religion. Where there is spiritual life there will be continuance and steady perseverance. It is the man who

goes on as well as begins, that is “the disciple indeed.”

These verses show us, for another thing, *the nature of true slavery*. The Jews were fond of boasting, though without any just cause, that they were politically free, and were not in bondage to any foreign power. Our Lord reminds them that there was another bondage to which they were giving no heed, although enslaved by it.—“He that committeth sin is the servant of sin.”

How true that is! How many on every side are thorough slaves, although they do not acknowledge it. They are led captive by their besetting corruptions and infirmities, and seem to have no power to get free. Ambition, the love of money, the passion for drink, the craving for pleasure and excitement, gambling, gluttony, illicit connections,—all these are so many tyrants among men. Each and all have crowds of unhappy prisoners bound hand and foot in their chains. The wretched prisoners will not allow their bondage. They will even boast sometimes that they are eminently *free*. But many of them know better. There are times when the iron enters into their souls, and they feel bitterly that they are slaves.

There is no slavery like this. Sin is indeed the hardest of all task masters. Misery and disappointment by the way, despair and hell in the end,—these are the only wages that sin pays to its servants. To deliver men from this bondage is the grand object of the Gospel. To awaken people to a sense of their degradation, to show them their chains, to make them arise and struggle to be free,—this is the great end for which Christ sent forth His ministers. Happy is he who has opened his eyes and found out his danger. To know that we are being led captive, is the very first step toward deliverance.

These verses show us, lastly, *the nature of true liberty*. Our Lord declares this to the Jews in one comprehensive sentence. He says, “If the Son shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed.”

Liberty, most Englishmen know, is rightly esteemed one of the highest temporal blessings. Freedom from foreign dominion, a free constitution, free trade, a free press, civil and religious liberty,—what a world of meaning lies beneath these phrases! How many would sacrifice life and fortune to maintain the things which they represent! Yet, after all our boasting, there are many so-called freemen who are nothing better than slaves. There are many who are totally ignorant of the highest, purest form of liberty. The noblest liberty is that which is the property of the true Christian. Those only are perfectly free people whom the Son of God “makes free.” All else will sooner or later be found slaves.

Wherein does the liberty of true Christians consist? Of what is their freedom made up?—They are freed from the guilt and consequences of sin by the blood of Christ. Justified, pardoned, forgiven, they can look forward boldly to the day of judgment, and cry “Who shall lay anything to our

charge? Who is he that condemneth?”—They are freed from the power of sin by the grace of Christ’s Spirit. Sin has no longer dominion over them. Renewed, converted, sanctified, they mortify and tread down sin, and are no longer led captive by it.—Liberty, like this, is the portion of all true Christians in the day that they flee to Christ by faith, and commit their souls to Him. That day they become free men. Liberty, like this, is their portion for evermore. Death cannot stop it. The grave cannot even hold their bodies for more than a little season. Those whom Christ makes free are free to all eternity.

Let us never rest till we have some personal experience of this freedom ourselves. Without it all other freedom is a worthless privilege. Free speech, free laws, political freedom, commercial freedom, national freedom, all these cannot smooth down a dying pillow, or disarm death of his sting, or fill our consciences with peace. Nothing can do that but the freedom which Christ alone bestows. He gives it freely to all who seek it humbly. Then let us never rest till it is our own.

NOTES. JOHN VIII. 31-36.

31.—[*Then Jesus said...Jews...believed...Him.*] It is clear, I think, from the tone of the conversation that runs from this verse uninterruptedly to the end of the chapter, that this “believing” was not faith of the heart. These Jews only “believed” that our Lord was One sent from heaven, and deserved attention. But they were the same Jews to whom He says by and by, “Ye are of your father the devil.”

[*If ye continue...my word...disciples indeed.*] This sentence does not mean that these Jews had really begun to receive Christ’s word into their hearts. Such a sense would be contradictory to the context. It must mean, “If you take up a firm stand on that Gospel and Word of Truth which I have come to proclaim, and go on sticking firmly to it in your hearts and lives, not merely convinced and wishing, but actually following Me, then you are truly my disciples.”—The word rendered “indeed” is more literally, “truly.” The converse throws light on our Lord’s meaning: “You are not truly disciples, unless you continue steadfast in my doctrine.”

Our Lord teaches the great principle, that steady continuance is the only real and safe proof of discipleship. No perseverance, no grace! No continuance in the word, no real faith and conversion! This is one of the meeting-points between Calvinist and Arminian. He that has true grace will not fall away. He that falls away has no true grace, and must not flatter himself he is a disciple.

Let us note that it is not the “word continuing in us,” but “our continuing in the word,” which makes us true disciples. The distinction is very important. The word “might continue in us,” and not be seen. If we “continue in the word,” our lives will show it. In John xv. 7, we have both expressions together: “If ye abide in Me, and my words abide in you.”

32.—[*And ye shall know the truth.*] The expression, “the truth,” here cannot, I think, mean the Personal Truth, the Messiah. It must be the whole doctrinal truth concerning myself, my nature, my mission, and my Gospel. Steady continuance in my Service shall lead to clear knowledge. It is a parallel saying to the sentence—“If any man will do His will, he shall know of the doctrine.” (vii. 17.) Honest obedience and steady perseverance in acting up to

our light, and doing what we learn, are one grand secret of obtaining more knowledge.

Chrysostom however thinks that our Lord means by "truth," Himself. "Ye shall know Me, for I am the truth." So also Augustine, Theophylact, Euthymius, and Lampe.

[*The truth shall make you free.*] This freedom can only mean spiritual freedom,—freedom from the guilt, burden, and dominion of sin,—freedom from the heavy yoke of Pharisaism, under which many Jews were labouring and heavy laden. (Matt. xi. 28.) "The Gospel I preach, and its good news, shall deliver you from spiritual bondage, and make you feel like men set at liberty."

I think these words must have been spoken with special reference to the bondage and spiritual slavery in which the Jews were kept by their principal teachers, when our Lord came among them. In the synagogue at Nazareth He had said, that He came "to preach deliverance to the captives." (Luke iv. 18.) This, however, is the first place in the Gospels where He openly declares that His Gospel will give men freedom.

Until truth comes into a man's heart, he never really knows what it is to feel true spiritual liberty.

Augustine says, "To Christ let us all flee. Against sin let us call on God to interpose as our Liberator. Let us ask to be taken on sale, that we may be redeemed by His blood."

33.—[*They answered, We be Abraham's seed.*] Here we see the usual pride of carnal descent coming out in the Jewish mind. It is just what John the Baptist told them when he preached, "Think not to say that we have Abraham to our father." (Matt. iii. 19.)

[*And were never in bondage to any man.*] This is the blindness of pride in its strongest form. The seed of Abraham were in bondage to the Egyptians and Babylonians for many years, to say nothing of the frequent bondages to Philistines, and other nations, as recorded in the book of Judges. Even now, while they spoke, they were in subjection to the Romans. The power of self-deception in unconverted man is infinite. These Jews were not more unreasonable than many now-a-days, who say, "We are not dead in sin; we have grace, we have faith, we are regenerate, we have the Spirit," while their lives show plainly that they are totally mistaken.

[*How sayest Thou...made free.*] This question was partly asked in anger and resentment, and partly in curiosity. Angry as the Jews were at the idea of being subject to any one, they yet caught at the expression, "be made free." It made them think of the glorious kingdom of Messiah, foretold in the Prophets.—"Art Thou going to restore the kingdom to Israel? Art Thou going to set us free from the Romans?"

We should observe here, as elsewhere, the readiness of our Lord's hearers to put a carnal sense on spiritual language. Nicodemus misunderstanding the new birth, the Samaritan woman and the living waters, the Capernaïtes and the bread from heaven, are all illustrations of what I mean. (See John iii. 4; iv. 11; vi. 34.)

Pearce thinks the Jews here spoke of themselves individually, and not of the Jewish nation. Yet surely even when they spoke they were subject to the Romans.

Henry observes, "Carnal hearts are sensible of no other grievances than those that molest the body and injure their secular affairs. Talk to them of encroachments on their civil liberty and property, tell of waste committed on their lands or damage done to their houses, and they understand you very well, and can give you a sensible answer: the thing touches and affects them. But discourse to them of the bondage of sin, or captivity to Satan, and a liberty by Christ,—tell them of wrong done to their souls, and you bring strange things to them."

34.—[*Jesus answered, etc.*] In this verse our Lord shows His hearers what kind of freedom He had meant, by showing the kind of slavery from which He wished them to be delivered. Did

they ask in what sense He meant they should be made free? Let them know, first of all, that in their present state of mind, wicked, worldly, and unbelieving, they were in a state of bondage. Living in habitual sin they were the “servants of sin.” This was a general proposition which they themselves must admit. The man that lived wilfully in habits of sin was acknowledged by all to be the slave of sin. Sin ruled over him, and he was its servant. This was an axiom in religion which they could not dispute, for even heathen philosophers admitted it. See Rom. vi. 16-20; 2 Pet. ii. 19.

“Committeth,” we must remember here, does not mean “commits an act of sin,” but habitually lives in the commission of sin. It is in this sense that St. John says, “He that committeth sin is of the devil,” and “He that is born of God doth not commit sin.” (1 John iii. 8, 9.)

35. —[*And the servant abideth not, etc.*] This is a difficult, because a very elliptical, verse. The leading object in our Lord’s mind seems to be to show the Jews the servile and slavish condition in which they were, so long as they rejected Him, the true Messiah, and the free and elevated position which they would occupy if they would believe in Him and become His disciples.—“At present, living under the bondage of the ceremonial law, and content with it and Pharisaic traditions, you are no better than slaves and servants, liable, like Hagar and Ishmael, to be cast out of God’s favour and presence at any moment.—Receiving Me, and believing on Me as the Messiah, you would at once be lifted to the position of sons, and would abide for ever in God’s favour, as adopted children and dear sons and daughters.—You know yourselves that the servant has no certain tenure in the house, and may be cast out at any time; while the son is heir to the father, and has a certain tenure in the house for ever.—Know that I wish you to be raised from the relation of servants to that of sons. Now, under the bondage you are in, you are like slaves. Receiving Me and my Gospel you would become children and free.”

Something like this seems the leading idea in our Lord’s mind. But it is vain to deny that it is a dark and difficult sentence, and requires much filling up and paraphrasing to complete its meaning. The simplest plan is to take it as a parenthesis. It then becomes a comment on the word “servant,” which to a Jew, familiar with the story of Hagar and Ishmael, would be very instructive, and would convey the latent thought that our Lord wished them to be not servants but sons. I cannot for a moment think that “the Son” in the last clause means the Son of God, or that the whole clause was meant to teach His eternity.

It is certainly possible that a deep mystical sense may lie under the words “servant” and “son” in this verse. “Servant” may mean the Jew, content with the interim and servile religion of Moses. “Son” may mean the believer in Christ, who receives the adoption and enjoys Gospel liberty. He that is content with Judaism will find his system and religion soon pass away. He that enters into Christ’s service will find himself a son for ever. But this is at best only conjectural, and a somewhat questionable interpretation.

One thing, at any rate, is very clear to my mind. The latent thought in our Lord’s mind is a reference to the story of Hagar and her son Ishmael being cast out as bondservants, while Isaac the son and heir abode in the house. He wished to impress on His hearers’ minds, that He desired them, like Isaac, to have the privilege of sons for ever, and to be free to all eternity. Keeping this thought in view, and regarding the verse as a parenthesis, its difficulties are not insuperable.

Chrysostom says, “‘Abideth not’ means ‘hath not power to grant favours, as not being master of the house;’ but the son is master of the house.” The Jewish priests were the servants, and Christ was the Son. The priests had no power to set free, the Son of God had. Theophylact and Euthymius take the same view.

Maldonatus calls attention to the expression in Hebrews, where Moses and Christ are

put in contrast, and each in connection with the word “house,”—Moses as a servant, Christ as a Son. St. Paul certainly seems there to refer to this passage. (Heb. iii. 2, 5, 6.)

36.—[*If the Son shall make you free, etc.*] In this verse our Lord explains what He had meant by freedom. It was a freedom from sin, its guilt, and power, and consequences, which believers in Him were to receive. “If I, the Son of man make you free, in the sense of delivering you from the burden of sin, then you will be free indeed!” This was the freedom that He wished them to obtain. Here, as elsewhere, our Lord carefully avoids saying anything to bring on Himself the charge of rebelling against constituted authorities, and of heading a popular rise for liberty.

The word rendered “indeed” here is not the word so rendered at the 31st verse. Here it means “really, in reality,” from the participle of the verb “to be.” There it means “truly.”

Let us not forget in these days that the only liberty which is truly valuable in God’s sight is that which Christ gives. All political liberty, however useful for many purposes, is worthless, unless we are children of God, and heirs of the kingdom, by faith in Jesus. He only is perfectly free who is free from sin. All beside are slaves. He that would be free in this fashion has only to apply to Christ for freedom. It is the peculiar office and privilege of the Lord Jesus to enfranchise for ever all who come to Him.

Augustine carries the freedom here promised far into the future. He remarks, “When shall there be full and perfect liberty? When there shall be no enemies, when the last enemy shall be destroyed, even death.”