

SHORT
EXPOSITORY READINGS
ON THE
GOSPEL OF ST. JOHN.

A SELECTION DESIGNED FOR
Family Reading, Mothers' Meetings, and
District Visitors.

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LXXXI.

CHRIST BEFORE PILATE.

JOHN XIX. 1–16.

“Then Pilate therefore took Jesus, and scourged Him.

“And the soldiers platted a crown of thorns, and put it on His head, and they put on Him a purple robe.

“And said, Hail, King of the Jews! and they smote Him with their hands.

“Pilate therefore went forth again, and saith unto them, Behold, I bring Him forth to you, that ye may know that I find no fault in Him.

“ Then came Jesus forth, wearing the crown of thorns, and the purple robe. And Pilate saith unto them, Behold the man!

“When the chief priests therefore and officers saw Him, they cried out, saying, Crucify Him, crucify Him. Pilate saith unto them, Take ye Him, and crucify Him: for I find no fault in Him.

“The Jewe answered him, We have a law, and by our law He ought to die, because He made Himself the Son of God.

“When Pilate therefore heard that saying, he was the more afraid;

“And went again into the judgment hall, and saith unto Jesus, Whence art Thou? But Jesus gave him no answer.

“Then saith Pilate unto Him, Speakest Thou not unto me? knowest Thou not that I have power to crucify Thee, and have power to release Thee?”

“Jesus answered, Thou couldest have no power at all against Me, except it were given thee from above; therefore he that delivered Me unto thee hath the greater sin.

“And from thenceforth Pilate sought to release Him: but the Jews cried out, saying, If thou let this man go, thou art not Cæsar’s friend: whosoever maketh himself a king speaketh against Cæsar.

“When Pilate therefore heard that saying, he brought Jesus forth, and sat down in the judgment seat in a place that is called the Pavement, but in the Hebrew, Gabbatha.

“And it was the preparation of the passover, and about the sixth hour; and he saith unto the Jews, Behold your King!

“But they cried out, Away with Him, away with Him, crucify Him. Pilate saith unto them, Shall I crucify your King? The chief priests answered, We have no king but Cæsar.

“Then delivered he Him therefore unto them to be crucified. And they took Jesus, and led Him away.”

THESE verses exhibit to our eyes a wonderful picture, a picture which ought to be deeply interesting to all who profess and call themselves Christians. Like every great historical picture, it contains special points on which we should fix our special attention. Above all, it contains

three life-like portraits, which we shall find it useful to examine in order.

The first portrait in the picture is that of our Lord Jesus Christ Himself.

We see the Saviour of mankind scourged, crowned with thorns, mocked, smitten, rejected by His own people, unjustly condemned by a judge who saw no fault in Him, and finally delivered up to a most painful death. Yet this was He who was the eternal Son of God whom the Father's countless angels delighted to honour! This was He who came into the world to save sinners, and after living a blameless life for thirty years, spent the last three years of His time on earth in going about doing good, and preaching the Gospel. Surely the sun never shone on a more wondrous sight since the day of its creation!

Let us admire that love of Christ which, St. Paul declares, "passeth knowledge," and let us see an endless depth of meaning in the expression. There is no earthly love with which it can be compared, and no standard by which to measure it. It is a love that stands alone. Never let us forget, when we ponder this tale of suffering, that Jesus suffered for *our* sins, the just for the unjust, that He was wounded for *our* transgressions and bruised for our iniquities, and that with His stripes we are healed.

Let us diligently follow the example of His patience in all the trials and afflictions of life, and especially in those which may be brought upon us by religion. When He was reviled, He reviled not again; when He suffered,

He threatened not, but committed Himself to Him that judgeth righteously. Let us arm ourselves with the same mind. Let us consider Him who endured such contradiction of sinners without a murmur, and strive to glorify Him by suffering well, no less than by doing well.

The second portrait in the picture before us, is that of the unbelieving Jews who favoured our Lord's death.

We see them for three or four long hours obstinately rejecting Pilate's offer to release our Lord,—fiercely demanding His crucifixion,—savagely claiming His condemnation to death as a right,—persistently refusing to acknowledge Him as their King,—declaring that they had no King but Cæsar,—and finally accumulating on their own heads the greater part of the guilt of His murder. Yet these were the children of Israel and the seed of Abraham, to whom pertained the promises and the Mosaic ceremonial, the temple sacrifices and the temple priesthood. These were men who professed to look for a "Prophet like unto Moses," and a "son of David" who was to set up a kingdom as Messiah. Never, surely, was there such an exhibition of the depth of human wickedness since the day when Adam fell.

Let us mark with fear and trembling the enormous danger of long-continued rejection of light and knowledge. There is such a thing as judicial blindness: and it is the last and sorest judgment which God can send upon men. He who, like Pharaoh and Ahab, is often reprovèd but refuses to receive reproof, will finally have a heart

harder than the nether mill-stone, and a conscience past feeling, and seared as with a hot iron. This was the state of the Jewish nation during the time of our Lord's ministry; and the heading up of their sin was their deliberate rejection of Him, when Pilate desired to let Him go. From such judicial blindness may we all pray to be delivered! There is no worse judgment from God than to be left to ourselves, and given over to our own wicked hearts and the devil. There is no surer way to bring that judgment upon us than to persist in refusing warnings and sinning against light. Those words of Solomon are very awful: "Because I have called, and ye refused; I have stretched out my hand, and no man regarded; but ye have set at nought all my counsel, and would none of my reproof: I also will laugh at your calamity; I will mock when your fear cometh." (Prov. i. 24–26.) Never let it be forgotten, that, like the Jews, we may at length be given up to strong delusion, so that we believe lies, and think that we are doing God service while we are committing sin. (2 Thess. ii. 11.)

The third and last portrait in the picture before us, is that of Pontius Pilate.

We see a Roman Governor,—a man of rank and high position,—an imperial representative of the most powerful nation on earth,—a man who ought to have been the fountain of justice and equity,—halting between two opinions in a case as clear as the sun at noon-day. We see him knowing what was right, and yet afraid to act up to

his knowledge,—convinced in his own conscience that he ought to acquit the prisoner before him, and yet afraid to do it lest he should displease His accusers,—sacrificing the claims of justice to the base fear of man, sanctioning, from sheer cowardice, an enormous crime,—and finally countenancing, from love of man’s good opinion, the murder of an innocent person. Never perhaps did human nature make such a contemptible exhibition. Never was there a name so justly handed down to a world’s scorn as the name which is embalmed in all our creeds,—the name of Pontius Pilate.

Let us learn what miserable creatures great men are, when they have no high principles within them, and no faith in the reality of a God above them. The meanest labourer who has grace and fears God is a nobler being in the eyes of His Creator than the King, ruler, or statesman, whose first aim it is to please the people. To have one conscience in private and another in public,—one rule of duty for our own souls, and another for our public actions,—to see clearly what is right before God, and yet for the sake of popularity to do wrong,—this may seem to some both right, and politic, and statesmanlike, and wise. But it is a character which no Christian man can ever regard with respect.

Let us pray that our own country may never be without men in high places who have grace to think right, and courage to act up to their knowledge, without truckling to the opinion of men. Those who fear God more than man,

and care for pleasing God more than man, are the best rulers of a nation, and in the long run of years are always most respected. Men like Pontius Pilate, who are always trimming and compromising, led by popular opinion instead of leading popular opinion, afraid of doing right if it gives offence, ready to do wrong if it makes them personally popular, such men are the worst governors that a country can have. They are often God's heavy judgment on a nation because of a nation's sins.

LXXXII.

CHRIST BEARING HIS CROSS.

JOHN XIX. 17, 18.

“And He bearing His cross went forth into a place called the place of a skull, which is called in the Hebrew Golgotha:

“Where they crucified Him, and two others with Him, on either side one, and Jesus in the midst.”

HE that can read a passage like this without a deep sense of man's debt to Christ, must have a very cold or a very thoughtless heart. Great must be the love of the Lord Jesus to sinners, when He could voluntarily endure such suffering for their salvation. Great must be the sinfulness of sin, when such an amount of vicarious suffering was needed in order to provide redemption.

We should observe, in this passage, *how our Lord had to bear His cross when He went forth from the city to Golgotha.*

We need not doubt that there was a deep meaning in all this circumstance. For one thing, it was part of that depth of humiliation to which our Lord submitted as our substitute. One portion of the punishment imposed on the vilest criminals was that they should carry their own cross when they went to execution; and this portion was laid

upon our Lord. In the fullest sense He was reckoned a sinner, and counted a sinner for our sakes.—For another thing, it was a fulfilment of the great type of the sin-offering of the Mosaic law. It is written, that “the bullock for the sin-offering, and the goat for the sin-offering, whose blood was brought in to make atonement in the holy place, shall one carry forth without the camp.” (Lev. xvi. 27.)

Little did the blinded Jews imagine, when they madly hounded on the Romans to crucify Jesus *outside* the gates, that they were unconsciously perfecting the mightiest sin-offering that was ever seen. It is written, “Jesus, that He might sanctify the people with His own blood, suffered without the gate.” (Heb. xiii. 12.)

The practical lesson which all true Christians should gather from the fact before us, is one that should be kept in continual remembrance. Like our Master, we must be content to go forth “without the camp,” bearing His reproach. We must come out from the world and be separate, and be willing, if need be, to stand alone. Like our Master, we must be willing to take up our cross daily, and to be persecuted both for our doctrine and our practice. Well would it be for the Church if there was more of the true cross to be seen among Christians! To wear material crosses as an ornament, to place material crosses on churches and tombs, all this is cheap and easy work, and entails no trouble. But to have Christ’s cross in our hearts, to carry Christ’s cross in our daily walk, to know the fellowship of His sufferings, to be made conformable to His

death, to have crucified affections, and live crucified lives,—all this needs self-denial; and Christians of this stamp are few and far between. Yet this, we may be sure, is the only cross-bearing and cross-carrying that does good in the world. The times require less of the cross outwardly and more of the cross within.

LXXXIII.

THE KING OF THE JEWS.

JOHN XIX. 19–27.

“And Pilate wrote a title, and put it on the cross. And the writing was, JESUS OF NAZARETH THE KING OF THE JEWS.

“This title then read many of the Jews: for the place where Jesus was crucified was nigh to the city; and it was written in Hebrew, and Greek, and Latin.

“Then said the chief priests of the Jews to Pilate, Write not, The King of the Jews; but that He said, I am King of the Jews.

“Pilate answered, What I have written I have written.

“Then the soldiers when they had crucified Jesus, took His garments, and made four parts, to every soldier a part; and also His coat: now the coat was without seam, woven from the top throughout.

“They said therefore among themselves, Let us not rend it, but cast lots for it, whose it shall be: that the Scripture might be fulfilled, which saith, They parted my raiment among them, and for my vesture they did cast lots. These things therefore the soldiers did.

“Now there stood by the cross of Jesus His mother, and His mother’s sister, Mary the wife of Cleophas, and Mary Magdalene.

“When Jesus therefore saw His mother, and the disciple standing by, whom He loved, He saith unto His mother, Woman, behold thy son!

“Then saith He to the disciple, Behold thy mother! And from that hour that disciple took her unto his own home.”

WE should observe, in this passage, *how our Lord was crucified as a King.*

The title placed over our Lord’s head made this plain and unmistakable. The reader of Greek, or Latin, or Hebrew, could not fail to see that He who hung on the central cross of the three on Golgotha had a royal title over His head. The overruling hand of God so ordered matters that the strong will of Pilate overrode for once the wishes of the malicious Jews. In spite of the chief priests our Lord was crucified as “the King of the Jews.”

It was meet and right that so it should be. Even before our Lord was born, the angel Gabriel declared to the Virgin Mary, “The Lord God shall give unto Him the throne of His father David: and He shall reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of His kingdom there shall be no end.” (Luke i. 32, 33.) Almost as soon as He was born there came wise men from the East, saying, “Where is He that is born King of the Jews?” (Matt. ii. 2.) The very week before the crucifixion, the multitude who accompanied our Lord at His triumphal entry into Jerusalem had cried, “Blessed is the King of Israel that cometh in the name of the Lord.” (John xii. 13.) The current belief of all godly

Jews was, that when Messiah, the Son of David came, He would come as a King. A “kingdom of heaven” and a “kingdom of God” were continually proclaimed by our Lord throughout His ministry. A King indeed He was, as He told Pilate, of a kingdom utterly unlike the kingdoms of this world, but for all that a true King of a true kingdom, and a Ruler of true subjects. As such He was born. As such He lived. As such He was crucified. And as such He will come again, and reign over the whole earth, King of kings and Lord of lords.

Let us take care that we ourselves know Christ as our King, and that His kingdom is set up within our hearts. They only will find Him their Saviour at the last day, who have obeyed Him as King in this world. Let us cheerfully pay Him that tribute of faith, and love, and obedience, which He prizes far above gold. Above all, let us never be afraid to own ourselves His faithful subjects, soldiers, servants and followers, however much He may be despised by the world. A day will soon come when the despised Nazarene who hung on the cross, shall take to Himself His great power and reign, and put down every enemy under His feet. The kingdoms of this world, as Daniel foretold, shall be swept aside, and become the kingdom of our God and of His Christ. (Dan. ii. 31–35.) And at last every knee shall bow to Him, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.

LXXXIV.

A FINISHED SALVATION.

JOHN XIX. 28–37.

“After this, Jesus knowing that all things were now accomplished, that the scripture might be fulfilled, saith, I thirst,

“Now there was set a vessel full of vinegar: and they filled a sponge with vinegar, and put it upon hyssop, and put it to His mouth,

“When Jesus therefore had received the vinegar, He said, It is finished: and He bowed His head, and gave up the ghost.

“The Jews therefore, because it was the preparation, that the bodies should not remain on the cross on the Sabbath day (for that Sabbath day was an high day), besought Pilate that their legs might be broken, and that they might be taken away,

“Then came the soldiers, and brake the legs of the first, and of the other which was crucified with Him.

“But when they came to Jesus, and saw that He was dead, already, they brake not His legs:

“But one of the soldiers with a spear pierced His side, and forthwith came there out blood and water.

“And he that saw it bare record, and his record is true: and he knoweth that he saith true, that ye might believe.

“For these things were done, that the scripture should be fulfilled, A bone of Him shall not be broken.

“And again another scripture saith, They shall look on Him whom they pierce.”

WE should mark, in these verses, *the peculiarly solemn saying which came from our Lord’s lips just before He died.* St. John relates that “when He had received the vinegar, He said, It is finished; and He bowed His head and gave up the ghost.” It is surely not too much to say, that of all the seven famous sayings of Christ on the cross, none is more remarkable than this, which John alone has recorded.

The precise meaning of this wondrous expression, “It is finished,” is a point which the Holy Ghost has not thought good to reveal to us. There is a depth about it we must all instinctively feel, which man has probably no line to fathom. Yet there is perhaps no irreverence in conjecturing the thoughts that were in our Lord’s mind when the word was spoken. The finishing of all the known and unknown sufferings which He came to endure, as our Substitute,—the finishing of the ceremonial law, which He came to wind up and fulfil, as the true Sacrifice for sin,—the finishing of the many prophecies, which He came to accomplish,—the finishing of the great work of man’s redemption, which was now close at hand,—all this, we need not doubt, our Lord had in view when He said, “It is finished.” There may have been more behind for aught we

know. But in handling the language of such a Being as our Saviour, on such an occasion, and at so mysterious a crisis of His history, it is well to be cautious. "The place whereon we stand is holy ground."

One comfortable thought, at all events, stands out most clearly on the face of this famous expression. We rest our souls on a "finished work," if we rest them on the work of Jesus Christ the Lord. We need not fear that either sin, or Satan, or law shall condemn us at the last day. We may lean back on the thought, that we have a Saviour who has done all, paid all, accomplished all, performed all that is necessary for our salvation. We may take up the challenge of the Apostle, "Who is he that condemneth? It is Christ that died: yea, rather, that is risen again; who is even at the right hand of God; who also maketh intercession for us." (Rom. viii. 34.) When we look at our own works, we may well be ashamed of their imperfections. But when we look at the finished work of Christ, we may feel peace. We "are complete in Him," if we believe. (Colos. ii. 10.)

LXXXV.

JOSEPH OF ARIMATHÆA.

JOHN XIX. 38.

“And after this Joseph of Arimathæa, being a disciple of Jesus, but secretly for fear of the Jews, besought Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus; and Pilate gave him leave. He came therefore, and took the body of Jesus”

WE learn from this incident that *there are some true Christians in the world of whom very little is known.* The case of Joseph of Arimathæa teaches this very plainly. Here is a man named among the friends of Christ, whose very name we never find elsewhere in the New Testament, and whose history, both before and after this crisis, is completely withheld from the Church. He comes forward to do honour to Christ, when the Apostles had forsaken Him and fled. He cares for Him, and delights to do Him service, even when dead,—not because of any miracle which He saw Him do, but out of free and gratuitous love. He does not hesitate to confess himself one of Christ’s friends, at a time when Jews and Romans alike had condemned Him as a malefactor, and put him to death. Surely the man who could do such things must have had strong faith! Can we wonder that wherever the Gospel is preached, throughout the whole world, this pious action

of Joseph is told of as a memorial of him?

Let us hope and believe that there are many Christians in every age, who, like Joseph, are the Lord's hidden servants, unknown to the Church and the world, but well known to God. Even in Elijah's time there were seven thousand in Israel who had never bowed the knee to Baal, although the desponding prophet knew nothing of it. Perhaps, at this very day, there are saints in the back streets of some of our great towns, or in the lanes of some of our country parishes, who make no noise in the world, and yet love Christ and are loved by Him. Ill-health, or poverty, or the daily cares of some laborious calling, render it impossible for them to come forward in public; and so they live and die comparatively unknown. Yet the last day may show an astonished world that some of these very people, like Joseph, honoured Christ as much as any on earth, and that their names were written in heaven. After all, it is special circumstances that bring to the surface special Christians. It is not those who make the greatest show in the Church who are always found the fastest friends of Christ.

LXXXVI.

THE END OF SOME BELIEVERS BETTER
THAN THE BEGINNING.

JOHN XIX. 39–42.

“And there came also Nicodemus, which at the first came to Jesus by night, and brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about an hundred pound weight.

“Then took they the body of Jesus, and wound it in linen clothes with the spices, as the manner of the Jews is to bury.

“Now in the place where He was crucified there was a garden; and in the garden a new sepulchre, wherein was never man yet laid.

“There laid they Jesus therefore because of the Jews’ preparation day; for the sepulchre was nigh at hand.”

WE learn, from these verses, that *there are some servants of Christ whose latter end is better than their beginning.* The case of Nicodemus teaches that lesson very plainly. The only man who dared to help Joseph in his holy work of burying our Lord was one who at first “came to Jesus by night,” and was nothing better than an ignorant inquirer after truth. At a later period in our Lord’s ministry we find this same Nicodemus coming forward with somewhat more boldness, and raising in the Council of the Pharisees

the question, “Doth our law judge any man, before it hear him, and know what he doeth?” (John vii. 51.) Finally, we see him in the passage before us, ministering to our Lord’s dead body, and not ashamed to take an active part in giving to the despised Nazarene an honourable burial. How great the contrast between the man who timidly crept into the Lord’s lodging to ask a question, and the man who brought a hundred pounds weight of myrrh and aloes to anoint His dead body! Yet it was the same Nicodemus. How great may be a man’s growth in grace, and faith, and knowledge, and courage, in the short space of three years.

We shall do well to store up these things in our minds, and to remember the case of Nicodemus, in forming our estimate of other people’s religion. We must not condemn others as graceless and godless, because they do not see the whole truth at once, and only reach decided Christianity by slow degrees. The Holy Ghost always leads believers to the same foundation truths, and into the same highway to heaven. In these there is invariable uniformity. But the Holy Ghost does not always leads believers through the same experience, or at the same rate of speed. In this there is much diversity in His operations. He that says conversion is a needless thing, and that an unconverted man may be saved, is undoubtedly under a strange delusion. But he that says that no one is converted except he becomes a full-blown and established Christian in a single day is no less under a delusion. Let us not judge others rashly and hastily. Let us believe that a man’s beginnings

in religion may be very small, and yet his latter end may greatly increase. Has a man real grace? Has he within him the genuine work of the Spirit? This is the grand question. If he has, we may safely hope that his grace will grow, and we should deal with him gently, and bear with him charitably, though at present he may be a mere babe in spiritual attainments. The life in a helpless infant is as real and true a thing as the life in a full-grown man: the difference is only one of degree. "Who hath despised the day of small things?" (Zech. iv. 10.) The very Christian who begins his religion with a timid night-visit, and an ignorant inquiry, may stand forward alone one day, and confess Christ boldly in the full light of the sun.