

SHORT
EXPOSITORY READINGS
ON THE
GOSPEL OF ST. JOHN.

A SELECTION DESIGNED FOR
Family Reading, Mothers' Meetings, and District Visi-
tors.

BY THE
RIGHT REV. JOHN CHARLES RYLE, D.D.,
LORD BISHOP OF LIVERPOOL.
Author of "Expository Thoughts on the Gospels" etc.

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XI.

CHRIST AND NICODEMUS.

JOHN III. 1, 2.

“There was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews:

“The same came to Jesus by night, and said unto Him, Rabbi, we know that Thou art a teacher come from God: for no man can do these miracles that Thou doest, except God be with him.”

WE should notice, in these verses, *what a weak and feeble beginning a man may make in religion, and yet finally prove a strong Christian.* We are told of a certain Pharisee, named Nicodemus, who, feeling concerned about his soul, “came to Jesus by night.”

There can be little doubt that Nicodemus acted as he did on this occasion from the fear of man. He was afraid of what man would think, or say, or do, if his visit to Jesus was known. He came “by night” because he had not faith and courage enough to come by day. And yet there was a time afterwards when this very Nicodemus took our Lord’s part in open day in the Council of the Jews. “Doth our law judge any man,” he said, “before it hear him, and know what he doeth?” (John vii. 51.)—Nor was this all. There came a time when this very Nicodemus was one of the only two men who did honour to our Lord’s dead

body. He helped Joseph of Arimathea to bury Jesus, when even the apostles had forsaken their Master and fled. His last things were more than his first. Though he began ill, he ended well.

The history of Nicodemus is meant to teach us that we should never “despise the day of small things” in religion. (Zec. iv. 10.) We must not set down a man as having no grace, because his first steps towards God are timid and wavering, and the first movements of his soul are uncertain, hesitating, and stamped with much imperfection. We must remember our Lord’s reception of Nicodemus. He did not “break the bruised reed, or quench the smoking flax,” which He saw before Him. (Matt. xii. 20.) Like Him, let us take inquirers by the hand, and deal with them gently and lovingly. In everything there must be a beginning. It is not those who make the most flaming profession of religion at first, who endure the longest and prove the most steadfast. Judas Iscariot was an apostle when Nicodemus was just groping his way slowly into full light. Yet afterwards when Nicodemus was boldly helping to bury his crucified Saviour, Judas Iscariot had betrayed Him, and hanged himself! This is a fact which ought not to be forgotten.

XII.

THE NEW BIRTH.

JOHN III. 3–8.

“Jesus answered and said unto him, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God,

“Nicodemus saith unto Him, How can a man be born when he is old? can he enter the second time into his mother’s womb, and be born?”

“Jesus answered, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.

“That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.

“Marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye must be born again.

“The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit.”

WE should notice, in these verses, *what a mighty change our Lord declares to be needful to salvation, and what a remarkable expression He uses in describing it.* He speaks of a new birth. He says to Nicodemus, “Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.” He announces the same truth in other words, in order to make it more plain to his hearer’s mind: “Except a man be born of

water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.” By this expression He meant Nicodemus to understand that “no one could become His disciple, unless his inward man was as thoroughly cleansed and renewed by the Spirit as the outward man is cleansed by water.” To possess the privileges of Judaism a man only needed to be born of the seed of Abraham after the flesh. To possess the privileges of Christ’s kingdom, a man must be born again of the Holy Ghost.

The change which our Lord here declares needful to salvation is evidently no slight or superficial one. It is not merely reformation, or amendment, or moral change, or outward alteration of life. It is a thorough change of heart, will, and character. It is a resurrection. It is a new creation. It is a passing from death to life. It is the implanting in our dead hearts of a new principle from above. It is the calling into existence of a new creature, with a new nature, new habits of life, new tastes, new desires, new appetites, new judgments, new opinions, new hopes, and new fears. All this, and nothing less than this, is implied when our Lord declares that we all need a “new birth.”

This change of heart is rendered absolutely necessary to salvation by the corrupt condition in which we are all, without exception, born. “That which is born of the flesh is flesh.” Our nature is thoroughly fallen. The carnal mind is enmity against God. (Rom. viii. 7.) We come into the world without faith, or love, or fear toward God. We have no natural inclination to serve Him or obey Him, and no

natural pleasure in doing His will. Left to himself, no child of Adam would ever turn to God. The truest description of the change which we all need in order to make us real Christians is the expression, “new birth.”

This mighty change, it must never be forgotten, we cannot give to ourselves. The very name which our Lord gives to it is a convincing proof of this. He calls it “a birth.” No man is the author of his own existence, and no man can quicken his own soul. We might as well expect a dead man to give himself life, as expect a natural man to make himself spiritual. A power from above must be put in exercise, even that same power which created the world. (2 Cor. iv. 6.) Man can do many things; but he cannot give life either to himself or to others. To give life is the peculiar prerogative of God. Well may our Lord declare that we need to be “born again.”

This mighty change, we must, above all, remember, is a thing without which we cannot go to heaven, and could not enjoy heaven if we went there. Our Lord’s words on this point are distinct and express. “Except a man be born again, he can neither *see* nor *enter* the kingdom of God.” Heaven may be reached without money, or rank, or learning. But it is clear as daylight, if words have any meaning, that nobody can enter heaven without a “new birth.”

Would we know what the marks of the new birth are?—We shall find them already written for our learning in the First Epistle of St. John. The man born of God “believes that Jesus is the Christ,”—“doth not commit sin,”—

“doeth righteousness,”—“loves the brethren,”—“overcomes the world,”—“keepeth himself from the wicked one.”—This is the man born of the Spirit! Where these fruits are to be seen, there is the new birth of which our Lord is speaking. He that lacks these marks is yet dead in trespasses and sins. (1 John v. 1; iii. 9; ii. 29; iii. 14; v. 4; v. 18.)

XIII.

THE WAY OF SALVATION.

JOHN III. 14–17.

“And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up:

“That whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have eternal life,

“For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life,

“For God sent not His Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through Him might be saved.

THESE verses show us, firstly, *the original source from which man’s salvation springs*. That source is the love of God the Father. Our Lord says to Nicodemus, “God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life.”

This wonderful verse has been justly called by Luther, “The Bible in miniature.” No part of it, perhaps, is so deeply important as the first five words, “God so loved the world.” The love here spoken of is not that special love with which the Father regards His own elect, but that mighty pity and compassion with which He regards the whole race of mankind. Its object is not merely the little

flock which He has given to Christ from all eternity, but the whole “world” of sinners, without any exception. There is a deep sense in which God *loves* that world. All whom He has created He regards with pity and compassion. Their sins He cannot love;—but He loves their souls. “His tender mercies are over all His works.” (Psal. cxlv. 9.) Christ is God’s gracious gift to the whole world.

These verses show us, secondly, *the peculiar plan by which the love of God has provided salvation for sinners.* That plan is the atoning death of Christ on the cross. Our Lord says to Nicodemus, “As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up: that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have eternal life.”

By being “lifted up,” our Lord meant nothing less than His own death upon the cross. That death, He would have us know, was appointed by God to be “the life of the world.” (John vi. 51.) It was ordained from all eternity to be the great propitiation and satisfaction for man’s sin. It was the payment, by an Almighty Substitute and Representative, of man’s enormous debt to God. When Christ died upon the cross, our many sins were laid upon Him. He was made “sin” for us. He was made “a curse” for us. (2 Cor. v. 21; Gal. iii. 13.) By His death He purchased pardon and complete redemption for sinners. The brazen serpent, lifted up in the camp of Israel, brought health and cure within the reach of all who were bitten by serpents. Christ crucified, in like manner, brought eternal life

within reach of lost mankind. Christ has been lifted up on the cross, and man looking to Him by faith may be saved.

The truth before us is the very foundation-stone of the Christian religion. Christ's death is the Christian's life. Christ's cross is the Christian's title to heaven. Christ "lifted up" and put to shame on Calvary is the ladder by which Christians "enter into the holiest," and are at length landed in glory. It is true that we are sinners;—but Christ has suffered for us. It is true that we deserve death;—but Christ has died for us. It is true that we are guilty debtors;—but Christ has paid our debts with His own blood. This is the real Gospel! This is the good news! On this let us lean while we live. To this let us cling when we die. Christ has been "lifted up" on the cross, and has thrown open the gates of heaven to all believers.

These verses show us, thirdly, *the way in which the benefits of Christ's death are made our own*. That way is simply to put faith and trust in Christ. Faith is the same thing as believing. Three times our Lord repeats this glorious truth to Nicodemus. Twice He proclaims that "who-soever believeth shall not perish." Once He says "He that believeth on the Son of God is not condemned."

Faith in the Lord Jesus is the very key of salvation. He that has it has life, and he that has it not has not life. Nothing whatever *beside* this faith is necessary to our complete justification; but nothing whatever, *except* this faith will give us an interest in Christ. We may fast and mourn for sin, and do many things that are right, and use religious

ordinances, and give all our goods to feed the poor, and yet remain unpardoned, and lose our souls.—But if we will only come to Christ as guilty sinners, and believe on Him, our sins shall at once be forgiven, and our iniquities shall be entirely put away. Without faith there is no salvation; but through faith in Jesus the vilest sinner may be saved.

XIV.

THE FRIEND OF THE BRIDEGROOM.

JOHN III. 22-36.

“After these things came Jesus and His disciples into the laud of Judæa; and there He tarried with them, and baptized,

“And John also was baptizing in Ænon near to Salim, because there was much water there: and they came and were baptized,

“For John was not yet cast into prison,

“Then there arose a question between some of John’s disciples and the Jews about purifying,

“And they came unto John, and said unto him, Rabbi, He that was with thee beyond Jordan, to whom thou barest witness, behold, the same baptizeth, and all men come to Him,

“John answered and said, A man can receive nothing, except it be given him from heaven,

“Ye yourselves bare me witness, that I said, I am not the Christ, but that I am sent before Him,

“He that hath the bride is the bridegroom: but the friend of the bridegroom, which standeth and heareth him, rejoiceth greatly because of the bridegroom’s voice: this my joy therefore is fulfilled,

“He must increase, but I must decrease,

“He that cometh from above is above all: he that is of the earth is earthly, and, speaketh of the earth: He that cometh from heaven is above all.

“And what He hath seen and heard, that He testifieth: and no man receiveth His testimony.

“He that hath received His testimony hath set to his seal that God is true.

“For he whom God hath sent speaketh the words of God: for God giveth not the Spirit by measure unto him.

“The Father loveth the Son and hath given all things into His hand.

“He that believeth on the Son, hath everlasting life: and he that believeth not the Son shall not see life; but the wrath of God abideth on him.”

ON one account this passage deserves the special attention of all devout readers of the Bible. It contains the last testimony of John the Baptist concerning our Lord Jesus Christ. That faithful man of God was the same at the end of his ministry that he was at the beginning,—the same in his views of self, —the same in his views of Christ. Happy is that Church whose ministers are as steady, bold, and constant to one thing as John the Baptist!

We have in these verses, *a splendid pattern of true and godly humility*. We see in John the Baptist a very different spirit from that displayed by his disciples. He begins by laying down the great principle, that acceptance with man is a special gift of God; and that we must therefore not

presume to find fault, when others have more acceptance than ourselves. “A man can receive nothing except it be given him from heaven.” He goes on to remind his followers of his repeated declaration, that One greater than himself was coming: “I said, I am not the Christ.” He tells them that his office compared to that of Christ is that of the bridegroom’s friend, compared to the bridegroom. And finally, he solemnly affirms, that Christ must and will become greater and greater, and that he himself must become less and less important, until, like a star eclipsed by the rising sun, he has completely disappeared.

A frame of mind like this is the highest degree of grace to which mortal man can attain. The greatest saint in the sight of God is the man who is most thoroughly “clothed with humility.” (1 Peter v. 5.) Would we know the prime secret of being men of the stamp of Abraham, and Moses, and Job, and David, and Daniel, and St. Paul, and John the Baptist? They were all eminently humble men. Living at different ages, and enjoying very different degrees of light, in this matter at least they were all agreed. In themselves they saw nothing but sin and weakness. To God they gave all the praise of what they were. Let us walk in their steps. Let us covet earnestly the best gifts; but above all, let us covet humility. The way to true honour is to be humble. No man ever was so praised by Christ as the very man who says here, “I must decrease,”—the humble John the Baptist.

We have again, in these verses, *an instructive declaration of Christ's honour and dignity*. John the Baptist teaches his disciples once more the true greatness of the Person whose growing popularity offended them. Once more, and perhaps for the last time, he proclaims Him as one worthy of all honour and praise. He uses one striking expression after another, to convey a correct idea of the majesty of Christ. He speaks of Him as "the bridegroom" of the Church,—as "Him that cometh from above,"—as "Him whom God hath sent,"—as "Him to whom the Spirit is given without measure,"—as Him "whom the Father loves," and into "whose hands all things are given,"—to believe in whom is life everlasting, and to reject whom is eternal ruin. Each of these phrases is full of deep meaning, and would supply matter for a long sermon. All show the depth and height of John's spiritual attainments. More honourable things are nowhere written concerning Jesus, than these verses recorded as spoken by John the Baptist.

Let us endeavour in life and death to hold the same views of the Lord Jesus, to which John here gives expression. We can never make too much of Christ. Our thoughts about the Church, the ministry, and the sacraments may easily become too high and extravagant. We can never have too high thoughts about Christ, can never love Him too much, trust Him too implicitly, lay too much weight upon Him, and speak too highly in His praise. He is worthy of all the honour that we can give Him. He will

be all in heaven. Let us see to it that He is all in our hearts on earth.

We have, lastly, in these verses, *a broad assertion of the nearness and presentness of the salvation of true Christians*. John the Baptist declares, “He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life.” He is not intended to look forward with a sick heart to a far distant privilege. He “hath” everlasting life as soon as he believes. Pardon, peace, and a complete title to heaven are an immediate possession. They become a believer’s own, from the very moment he puts faith in Christ. They will not be more completely his own if he lives to the age of Methuselah.

The truth before us is one of the most glorious privileges of the Gospel. There are no works to be done, no conditions to be fulfilled, no price to be paid, no wearing years of probation to be passed, before a sinner can be accepted with God. Let him only believe on Christ, and he is at once forgiven. Salvation is close to the chief of sinners. Let him only repent and believe, and this day it is his own. By Christ all that believe are at once justified from all things.