

SHORT
EXPOSITORY READINGS
ON THE
GOSPEL OF ST. JOHN.

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

BY THE
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XIX.

CHRIST AT BETHESDA.

JOHN V. 1–15.

“After this there was a feast of the Jews; and Jesus went up to Jerusalem.

“Now there is at Jerusalem by the sheep market a pool, which is called in the Hebrew tongue Bethesda, having five porches.

“In these lay a great multitude of impotent folk, of blind, halt, withered, waiting for the moving of the water.

“For an angel went down at a certain season into the pool, and troubled the water; whosoever then first after the troubling of the water stepped in was made whole of whatsoever disease he had.

“And a certain man was there, which had an infirmity thirty and eight years.

“When Jesus saw him lie, and knew that he had been now a long time in that case, he saith unto him, Wilt thou be made whole?

“The impotent man answered Him, Sir, I have no man, when the water is troubled, to put me into the pool: but while I am coming another steppeth down before me.

“Jesus saith unto him, Rise, take up thy bed, and walk.

“And immediately the man was made whole, and took up his bed, and walked, and on the same day was the sabbath.

“The Jews therefore said unto him that was cured, It is the sabbath day: it is not lawful for thee to carry thy bed.

“He answered them, He that made me whole the same said unto me, Take up thy bed, and walk.

“Then asked they him, What man is that which said unto thee, Take up thy bed, and walk?

“And he that was healed wist not who it was: for Jesus had conveyed Himself away, a multitude being in that place.

“Afterward Jesus findeth him in the temple, and said unto him, Behold, thou art made whole: sin no more, lest a worse thing come unto thee.

“The man departed, and told the Jews that it was Jesus, which had made him whole.”

WE are taught, for one thing, in this passage, *what misery sin has brought into the world*. We read of a man who had been ill for no less than thirty-eight years! For eight-and-thirty weary summers and winters he had endured pain and infirmity. He had seen others healed at the waters of Bethesda, and going to their homes rejoicing. But for him there had been no healing. Friendless, helpless, and hopeless, he lay near the wonder-working waters, but derived no benefit from them. Year after year passed away, and

left him still uncured. No relief or change for the better seemed likely to come, except from the grave.

When we read of cases of sickness like this, we should remember how deeply we ought to hate sin. Sin was the original root, and cause, and fountain of every disease in the world. God did not create man to be full of aches, and pains, and infirmities. These things are the fruits of the Fall. There would have been no sickness, if there had been no sin.

Well may we be told to pray for the coming of God's kingdom! Well may we be told to long for the second advent of Jesus Christ! Then, and not till then, shall there be no more curse on the earth, no more suffering, no more sorrow, and no more sin. Tears shall be wiped from the faces of all who love Christ's appearing, when their Master returns. Weakness and infirmity shall all pass away. Hope deferred shall no longer make hearts sick. There will be no chronic invalids and incurable cases, when Christ has renewed this earth.

We are taught, for another thing, in this passage, *how great is the mercy and compassion of Christ*. He "saw" the poor sufferer lying in the crowd. Neglected, overlooked, and forgotten in the great multitude, he was observed by the all-seeing eye of Christ. "He knew" full well, by His Divine knowledge, how long he had been "in that case," and pitied him. He spoke to him unexpectedly, with words of gracious sympathy. He healed him by

miraculous power, at once and without tedious delay, and sent him home rejoicing.

This is just one among many examples of our Lord Jesus Christ's kindness and compassion. He is full of undeserved, unexpected, abounding love towards man. "He delighteth in mercy." (Micah vii. 18.) He is far more ready to save than man is to be saved, far more willing to do good than man is to receive it.

No one ever need be afraid of beginning the life of a true Christian, if he feels disposed to begin. Let him not hang back and delay, under the vain idea that Christ is not willing to receive him. Let him come boldly and trust confidently. He that healed the cripple at Bethesda is still the same.

We are taught, lastly, the *lesson that recovery from sickness ought to impress upon us*. That lesson is contained in the solemn words which our Saviour addressed to the man He had cured: "Sin no more, lest a worse thing come unto thee."

Every sickness and sorrow is the voice of God speaking to us. Each has its peculiar message. Happy are they who have an eye to see God's hand, and an ear to hear His voice, in all that happens to them. Nothing in this world happens by chance.

And as it is with sickness, so it is with recovery. Renewed health should send us back to our post in the world with a deeper hatred of sin, a more thorough watchfulness over our own ways, and a more constant purpose of mind

to live to God. Far too often the excitement and novelty of returning health tempt us to forget the vows and intentions of the sick-room. There are spiritual dangers attending a recovery! Well would it be for us all after illness to grave these words on our hearts, "Let me sin no more, lest a worse thing come unto me."

XX.

CHRIST ON THE SABBATH.

JOHN V. 16–18.

“And therefore did the Jews persecute Jesus, and sought to slay Him, because He had done these things on the sabbath day.

“But Jesus answered them, My Father worketh hitherto, and I work,

“Therefore the Jews sought the more to kill Him, because He not only had broken the sabbath, but said also that God was His Father, making Himself equal with God.”

WE learn from the verses before us, that *there are some works which it is lawful to do on the Sabbath day.*

The Jews, as on many other occasions, found fault because Jesus healed a man who had been ill for thirty-eight years on the Sabbath. They charged our Lord with a breach of the fourth commandment.

Our Lord’s reply to the Jews is very remarkable. “My Father,” He says, “worketh hitherto, and I also work.” It is as though he said:—“Though my Father rested on the seventh day from His work of creation, He has never rested for a moment from His providential government of the world, and from His merciful work of supplying the

daily wants of all His creatures. Were He to rest from such work, the whole frame of Nature would stand still. And I also work works of mercy on the Sabbath day. I do not break the fourth commandment when I heal the sick, any more than my Father breaks it when He causes the sun to rise and the grass to grow on the Sabbath.”

We must distinctly understand, that neither here nor elsewhere does the Lord Jesus overthrow the obligation of the fourth commandment. Neither here nor elsewhere is there a word to justify the vague assertions of some modern teachers, that “Christians ought not to keep the Sabbath,” and that it is “a Jewish institution which has passed away.” The utmost that our Lord does, is to place the claims of the Sabbath on the right foundation. He clears the day of rest from the false and superstitious teaching of the Jews, about the right way of observing it. He shows us clearly that works of necessity and works of mercy are no breach of the fourth commandment.

After all, the errors of Christians on this subject, in these latter days, are of a very different kind from those of the Jews. There is little danger of men keeping the Sabbath too strictly. The thing to be feared is the disposition to keep it loosely and partially, or not to keep it at all. The tendency of the age is not to exaggerate the fourth commandment, but to cut it out of the Decalogue, and throw it aside altogether. Against this tendency it becomes us all to be on our guard. The experience of eighteen centuries

supplies abundant proofs that vital religion never flourishes when the Sabbath is not well kept.

XXI.

THE MAJESTY OF CHRIST.

JOHN V. 19–23.

“Then answered Jesus and said unto them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, The Son can do nothing of Himself, but what He seeth the Father do: for what things soever He doeth, these also doeth the Son likewise.

“For the Father loveth the Son, and sheweth Him all things that Himself doeth: and He will shew Him greater works than these, that ye may marvel.

“For as the Father raiseth up the dead, and quickeneth them; even so the Son quickeneth whom He will.

“For the Father judgeth no man, but hath committed all judgment unto the Son:

“That all men should honour the Son, even as they honour the Father. He that honoureth not the Son honoureth not the Father which hath sent Him.”

THESE verses begin one of the most deep and solemn passages in the four Gospels. They show us the Lord Jesus asserting His own Divine nature, His unity with God the Father, and the high dignity of His office. Nowhere does our Lord dwell so fully on these subjects as in the chapter before us. And nowhere, we must confess, do we find out so thoroughly the weakness of man’s understanding!

There is much, we must all feel, that is far beyond our comprehension in our Lord's account of Himself. Such knowledge, in short, is too wonderful for us. "It is high: we cannot attain unto it." (Psalm cxxxix. 6.) How often men say that they want clear explanations of such doctrines as the Trinity. Yet here we have our Lord handling the subject of His own Person, and, behold, we cannot follow Him! We seem only to touch His meaning with the tip of our fingers.

We learn from these verses, *the dignity and greatness of our Lord Jesus Christ,*

The Jews, we are told, sought to kill Jesus because He said "that God was His Father, making Himself equal with God." Our Lord, in reply, on this special occasion, enters very fully into the question of His own Divine nature. In reading His words, we must all feel that we are reading mysterious things, and treading on very holy ground. But we must feel a deep conviction, however little we may understand, that the things He says could never have been said by one who was only man. The Speaker is nothing less than "God manifest in the flesh." (1 Tim. iii. 16.)

He asserts His own unity with God the Father. No other reasonable meaning can be put on the expressions,—"The Son can do nothing of Himself, but what He seeth the Father do: for what things soever He doeth, these also doeth the Son likewise. The Father loveth the Son, and showeth Him all things that Himself doeth." Such language, however deep and high, appears to mean that in

operation, and knowledge, and heart, and will, the Father and the Son are One,—two Persons, but one God. Truths such as these are of course beyond man's power to explain particularly. Enough for us to believe and rest upon them.

He asserts, in the next place, His own Divine power to give life. He tells us, "The Son quickeneth whom He will." Life is the highest and greatest gift that can be bestowed. It is precisely that thing that man, with all his cleverness, can neither give to the work of his hands, nor restore when taken away. But life, we are told, is in the hands of the Lord Jesus, to bestow and give at His discretion. Dead bodies and dead souls are both alike under His dominion. He has the keys of death and hell. In Him is life. He is the life. (John i. 4. Rev. i. 18.)

He asserts, in the last place, His own authority to judge the world. "The Father," we are told, "has committed all judgment unto the Son." All power and authority over the world is committed to Christ's hands. He is the King and the Judge of mankind. Before Him every knee shall bow, and every tongue shall confess that He is Lord. He that was once despised and rejected of man, condemned and crucified as a malefactor, shall one day hold a great assize, and judge all the world. "God shall judge the secrets of men by Jesus Christ" (Rom. ii. 16.)

And now let us think whether it is possible to make too much of Christ in our religion. If we have ever thought so, let us cast aside the thought for ever. Both in His own nature as God, and in His office as commissioned

Mediator, He is worthy of all honour. He that is one with the Father,—the Giver of life,—the King of kings,—the coming Judge, can never be too much exalted. “He that honoureth not the Son, honoureth not the Father that sent Him.”

If we desire salvation, let us lean our whole weight on this mighty Saviour. So leaning we never need be afraid. Christ is the rock of ages, and he that builds on Him shall never be confounded—neither in sickness, nor in death, nor in the judgment-day. The hand that was nailed to the cross is Almighty. The Saviour of sinners is “mighty to save.” (Isaiah lxiii. 1.)

XXII.

PRESENT SALVATION.

JOHN V. 24–29.

“Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that heareth my word, and believeth on Him that sent Me, hath everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation; but is passed from death unto life.

“Verily, verily, I say unto you, The hour is coming, and now is, when the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God: and they that hear shall live.

“For as the Father hath life in Himself; so hath He given to the Son to have life in Himself.

“And hath given Him authority to execute judgment also, because He is the Son of man.

“Marvel not at this; for the hour is coming, in the which all that are in the graves shall hear His voice,

“And shall come forth; they that have done good, unto the resurrection of life; and they that have done evil, unto the resurrection of damnation.”

WE see in these verses that *the salvation of our souls depends on hearing Christ*. It is the man, we are told, who “hears Christ’s word,” and believes that God the Father sent Him to save sinners, “who has everlasting life.” Such “hearing” of course is something more than mere

listening. It is hearing as a humble scholar,—hearing as an obedient disciple,—hearing with faith and love,—hearing with a heart ready to do Christ's will: this is the hearing that saves. It is the very hearing of which God spake in the famous prediction of a "prophet like unto Moses:"—"Unto him shall ye hearken."—"Whosoever will not hearken unto my words which he shall speak in my name, I will require it of him." (Deut. xviii. 15–19.)

We see, secondly, in these verses, *how rich and full are the privileges of the true hearer and believer*. Such a man enjoys a present salvation. Even now, at this present time, he "hath everlasting life."—Such a man is completely justified and forgiven. There remains no more condemnation for him. His sins are put away. "He shall not come into condemnation."—Such a man is in an entirely new position before God. He is like one who has moved from one side of a gulf to another: "He has passed from death unto life."

The privileges of a true Christian are greatly underrated by many. Chiefly from deplorable ignorance of Scripture, they have little idea of the spiritual treasures of every believer in Jesus. These treasures are brought together here in beautiful order, if we will only look at them. One of a true Christian's treasures is the "presentness" of His salvation. It is not a far distant thing which he is to have at last, if he does his duty and is good. It is his own in title the moment he believes. He is already pardoned, forgiven, and saved, though not in heaven.—Another of a

true Christian's treasures is the "completeness" of his justification. His sins are entirely removed, taken away, and blotted out of God's book, by Christ's blood. He may look forward to judgment without fear, and say, "Who is he that condemneth?" (Rom. viii. 34.) He shall stand without fault before the throne of God.—The last, but not the least, of a true Christian's treasures, is the entire change in his relation and position toward God. He is no longer as one dead before Him,—dead, legally, like a man sentenced to die, and dead in heart. He is "alive unto God." (Rom. vi. 11.) "He is a new creature. Old things are passed away, and all things are become new." (2 Cor. v. 17.) Well would it be for Christians if these things were better known! It is want of knowledge, in many cases, that is the secret of want of peace. Let us make sure that we hear Christ's quickening voice now, and are numbered among His true disciples. Let us know the privileges of true believers, while we have life and health. Then, when His voice shakes heaven and earth, and is calling the dead from their graves, we shall feel confidence, and not be "ashamed before Him at His coming." (1 John ii. 28.)

XXIII.

THE STUBBORN WILL.

JOHN V. 40–47.

“And ye will not come to Me, that ye might have life.

“I receive not honour from men.

“But I know you, that ye have not the love of God in you.

“I am come in my Father’s name, and ye receive Me not: if another shall come in his own name, him ye will receive.

“How can ye believe, which receive honour one of another, and seek not the honour that cometh from God only?

“Do not think that I will accuse you to the Father: there is one that accuseth you, even Moses, in whom ye trust.

“For had ye believed Moses, ye would have believed Me: for he wrote of Me.

“But if ye believe not his writings, how shall ye believe my words?”

LET us mark, in this passage, *the reason why many souls are lost*. The Lord Jesus says to the unbelieving Jews, “Ye will not come to Me, that ye might have life.”

These words are a golden sentence, which ought to be engraven in our memories, and treasured up in our minds. It is want of will to come to Christ for salvation that will be found, at last, to have shut the many out of heaven. It

is not men's sins: all manner of sin may be forgiven. It is not any decree of God: we are not told in the Bible of any whom God has only created to be destroyed. It is not any limit in Christ's work of redemption: He has paid a price sufficient for all mankind. It is something far more than this: it is man's own innate unwillingness to come to Christ, repent, and believe. Either from pride, or laziness, or love of sin, or love of the world, the many have no mind, or wish, or heart, or desire to seek life in Christ. "God has given to us eternal life, and this life is in His Son." (1 John v. 11.) But men stand still, and will not stir hand or foot to get life. And this is the whole reason why many of the lost are not saved.

This is a painful and solemn truth, but one that we can never know too well. It contains a first principle in Christian theology. Thousands, in every age, are constantly labouring to shift the blame of their condition from off themselves. They talk of their inability to change. They tell you complacently, that they *cannot help* being what they are! They know, forsooth, that they are wrong, but they *cannot* be different!—It will not do. Such talk will not stand the test of the Word of Christ before us. The unconverted are what they are because they have no will to be better. "Light is come into the world, and men love darkness rather than light." (John iii. 19.) The words of the Lord Jesus will silence many: "I would have gathered you, and ye would not be gathered." (Matt, xxiii. 37.)

Let us mark, secondly, in this passage, *one principal cause of unbelief*. The Lord Jesus says to the Jews, “How can ye believe which receive honour one of another, and seek not the honour that cometh of God only?” He meant by that saying, that they were not honest in their religion. With all their apparent desire to hear and learn, they cared more in reality for pleasing man than God. In this state of mind they were never likely to believe.

A deep principle is contained in this saying of our Lord’s, and one that deserves special attention. True faith does not depend merely on the state of man’s head and understanding, but on the state of his heart. His mind may be convinced: his conscience may be pricked: but so long as there is anything the man is secretly loving more than God, there will be no true faith. The man himself may be puzzled, and wonder why he does not believe. He does not see that he is like a child sitting on the lid of his box, and wishing to open it, but not considering that his own weight keeps it shut. Let a man make sure that he honestly and really desires first the praise of God. It is the want of an honest heart which makes many stick fast in their religion all their days, and die at length without peace.

Those who complain that they hear, and approve, and assent, but make no progress, and cannot get any hold on Christ, should ask themselves this simple question,—“Am I honest?—Am I sincere?—Do I really desire first the praise of God?”