EXPOSITORY THOUGHTS

ON THE GOSPELS.

FOR FAMILY AND PRIVATE USE.

WITH THE TEXT COMPLETE,
*And Many Explanatory Notes*.

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ST. LUKE. VOL. II.

LONDON:
WILLIAM HUNT AND COMPANY, 23, HOLLES STREET.

CAVENDISH SQUARE

IPSWICH: WILLIAM HUNT, TAVERN STREET.

MDCCCLVIII.

LUKE XXIII. 50–56.

50 And, behold, *there was* a man named Joseph, a counsellor; *and he was* a good man and a just:

51 (The same had not consented to the counsel and deed of them;) *he was* of Arimathæa, a city of the Jews: who also himself waited for the kingdom of God.

52 This *man* went unto Pilate, and begged the body of Jesus.

53 And he took it down, and wrapped it in linen, and laid it in a sepulchre that was hewn in stone, wherein never man before was laid.

54 And that day was the prepara­tion, and the sabbath drew on.

55 And the women also, which came with him from Galilee, follow­ed after, and beheld the sepulchre, and how his body was laid.

56 And they returned, and pre­pared spices and ointments; and rested the Sabbath day according to the commandment.

WE see from *these* verses *that Christ has some disciples of whom little is known.* We are told of one Joseph, “a good man and a just,”—a man who “had not consented to the counsel” of those who condemned our Lord,—a man who “himself waited for the kingdom of God.” This man went boldly to Pilate after the crucifixion, begged the body of Jesus, “took it down,” from the cross, and “laid it in a sepulchre.”

We know nothing of Joseph excepting what is here told us. In no part of the Acts or Epistles do we find any mention of his name: at no former period of our Lord’s ministry does he ever come forward. His reason for not openly joining the disciples before, we cannot explain; but here, at the eleventh hour, this man is not afraid to show himself one of our Lord’s friends. At the very time when the apostles had forsaken Jesus, Joseph is not ashamed to show his love and respect. Others had confessed Him while He was living and doing miracles; it was reserved for Joseph to confess Him when He was dead.

The history of Joseph is full of instruction and encou­ragement. It shows us that Christ has friends of whom the Church knows little or nothing, friends who profess less than some do, but friends who in real love and affection are second to none. It shows us, above all, that events may bring out grace in quarters where at present we do not expect it; and that the cause of Christ may prove one day to have many supporters, of whose exist­ence we are at present not aware: these are they whom David calls “hidden ones,” and Solomon compares to a “lily among thorns.” (Psalm lxxxiii. 3; Cant. ii. 2.)

Let us learn from the case of Joseph of Arimathæa, to be charitable and hopeful in our judgments. All is not barren in this world, when our eyes perhaps see nothing: there may be some latent sparks of light when all appear dark. Little plants of spiritual life may be existing in some remote Romish, or Greek, or Armenian congregations, which the Father Himself has planted; grains of true faith may be lying hid in some neglected English parish, which have been placed there by God. There were seven thousand true worshippers in Israel of whom Elijah knew nothing. The day of judgment will bring forward men who seemed last, and place them among the first. (1 Kings xix. 18.)

We see, secondly, from these verses *the reality of Christ’s death.* This is a fact which is placed beyond dispute, by the circumstances related about His burial. Those who took His body from the cross, and wrapped it in linen, could not have been deceived: their own senses must have been witnesses to the fact that He whom they handled was a corpse; their own hands and eyes must have told them that He whom they laid in Joseph’s sepulchre was not alive but dead.

The importance of the fact before us is far greater than a careless reader supposes. If Christ did not really die, there would be an end of all the comfort of the Gospel: nothing short of His death could have paid man’s debt to God. His incarnation, and sermons, and parables, and miracles, and sinless obedience to the law, would have availed nothing, if He had not died. The penalty threatened to the first Adam was death eternal in hell; if the second Adam had not really and actually died in our stead, as well as taught us truth, the original penalty would have continued in full force against Adam and all his children. It was the life-blood of Christ which was to save our souls.

For ever let us bless God that our great Redeemer’s death is a fact beyond all dispute. The centurion who stood by the cross, the friends who took out the nails, and laid the body in the grave, the women who stood by and beheld, the priests who sealed up the grave, the soldiers who guarded the sepulchre,—all, all are witnesses that Jesus actually was dead. The great sacrifice was really offered; the life of the Lamb was actually taken away: the penalty due to sin has actually been discharged by our Divine Substitute. Sinners believing in Jesus may hope and not be afraid. In themselves they are guilty: but Christ hath died for the ungodly; and their debt is now completely paid.

We see, lastly, in these verses, the *respect paid by Christ’s disciples to the fourth commandment.* We are told that the women who had prepared spices and ointment to anoint our Lord’s body, “rested the Sabbath Day, according to the commandment.”

This little fact is a strong indirect argument in reply to those who tell us that Christ abolished the fourth commandment. Neither here nor elsewhere do we find anything to warrant any such conclusion. We see our Lord frequently denouncing the man-made traditions of the Jews about Sabbath observance: we see Him purify­ing the blessed day from superstitious and unscriptural opinions; we see Him maintaining firmly that works of necessity and works of mercy were not breaches of the fourth commandment: but nowhere do we find Him teaching that the Sabbath was not to be kept at all; and here, in the verse before us, we find His disciples as scrupulous as any about the duty of keeping holy a Sabbath Day. Surely they could never have been taught by their Master that the fourth commandment was not intended to be binding on Christians.

Let us cling firmly to the old doctrine that the Sabbath is not a mere Jewish institution, but a day which was meant for man from the beginning, and which was in­tended to be honoured by Christians quite as much as by Jews. Let us not doubt that the Apostles were taught by our Lord to change the day from the last day of the week to the first, although mercifully checked from publicly proclaiming the change in order to avoid giving offence to Israel. Above all, let us regard the Sabbath as an institution of primary importance to man’s soul, and contend earnestly for its preservation amongst us in all its integrity. It is good for body, mind, and soul: it is good for the Nation which observes it, and for the Church which gives it honour. It is but a few steps from “no Sabbath” to “no God.” The man who would make the Sabbath a day for business and pleasure, is an enemy to the best interests of his fellow creatures; the man who supposes that a believer ought to be so spiritual as not to need the separation of one day in the week from the rest, can know but little of the human heart, or the require­ments of our position in an ensnaring and evil world.

NOTES. LUKE. XXIII. 50–56.

50*.—*[*Joseph, a counsellor.*]The meaning of this probably is, that Joseph belonged to the great council, or Sanhedrim, of the Jewish nation. The beginning of the following verse appears to prove that he was present when it was determined to seize Jesus and put Him to death, and had voted, or pro­tested, against the decision of the majority.

51.—[*Waited for the kingdom of God.*]This expression re­minds us of the expressions used about Simeon and Anna. Joseph expected the Messiah’s spiritual kingdom to be set up, and believed that Jesus was the Messiah.

52*.—*[*Begged the body.*]This expression deserves notice. It shows that Joseph believed our Lord to be dead. We are also distinctly told by St. Mark (Mark xv. 44) that Pilate only granted the request of Joseph on the express assurance of the centurion that Jesus was dead.

53.—[*Took* *it down...wrapped in linen.*]This expression again deserves notice. It is absurd to suppose that the nails could have been drawn from our Lord’s hands and feet, and the body prepared for burial by wrapping it in linen, without some signs of life being perceived, if life had remained in Him. To see the vastness of the miracle of Christ’s resurrection, it is essential to be thoroughly persuaded that Christ really died.

[*A* *sepulchre that was hewn in stone.*]These sepulchres were generally caves hewn out of the side of a rock, and not graves sunk perpendicularly in the ground. The com­mon pictures of Christ’s resurrection give a most incorrect notion of His sepulchre.

The fact that the sepulchre was hewn out of a *rock* deserves notice. It shows that there could not possibly have been any clandestine withdrawal of the body by a subterraneous passage dug through earth.

[*Wherein never man before was laid.*]This circumstance is specially mentioned in order to show that no other body but that of our Lord was in the sepulchre, and that the per­son who rose was Jesus Christ, and no one else.

54*.—*[*The preparation.*]The day on which our Lord was cruci­fied was the day before the Passover Sabbath, an occasion of peculiar solemnity. Gill says, “It was the preparation both for the Sabbath and for the Chagigah: a grand festival which they kept on the fifteenth dayof the month in a very pompous manner.

[*The Sabbath drew on.*]This expression is remarkable, and requires explanation. The literal meaning of the Greek would be, “The Sabbath was dawning.” But the Jewish Sabbath we know began in the evening at sunset: how then can we explain St. Luke’s saying, “The Sabbath was dawning “

Gill says, “This is so said, though it was evening, on account of the lights which were lighted up in every house at this time.”

Lightfoot says, “The Sabbatical candles which were lighted in honour of the Sabbath were now set up.” He also gives a quotation from a Rabbinical writer, which says, “By the light of the fourteenth day they made a search for leaven by the light of a candle.”

Poole says that some refer the expression to the evening star which was beginning to rise. Cocceius thinks it must mean the next morning.

Campbell says, “In all other nations but the Jewish, it was customary to reckon the morning the first part of the day, and the evening the second. Luke, who according to Eusebius had lived much among the Gentiles and those “who used this style of speaking, would insensibly acquire a habit of using it.”

Alford considers that St. Luke employed “a natural word, used of the conventional day beginning at sunset.”

I believe this last explanation to be the right one. We use several expressions ourselves, such as the sun “rising” and “setting,” which are not strictly accurate and scientifically correct. But they are the only expressions that the most would understand. If Luke had said, “The Sabbath began to grow dusky or gloomy,” no Gentile reader would have understood him.

55.—[*The* *women who, &c.*]This verse is meant to show us, that friends of our Lord who could not possibly be mistaken as to His identity, were witnesses to the fact of His burial, and actually saw His body laid in the grave. They saw the linen in which He was wrapped, and could therefore testify two days after, that the very same linen was found wrapped together in the empty tomb.

56.—[*They prepared spices and ointment.*]This shows that the women were fully satisfied that our Lord was dead, and had also no expectation that He would rise again.

[*Rested the Sabbath Day.*]Burgon remarks, “These pious woman, eager as they were to perform the last offices of love to their Lord, yet would not transgress the commandment. How blessed was the result! How unblessed would have been the impatient yielding to their own inclination! Had they presented themselves sooner at the grave, they would have been grieved by the presence or molested by the rude­ness of the Roman soldiers; while their purpose could not possibly have been effected. By waiting till the Sabbath was past, they found the guard dispersed, and their Lord already risen. They unbound those limbs alive, which they had come to weep over and anoint in death.”