TALKS TO MEN

ABOUT THE BIBLE AND THE CHRIST OF THE BIBLE

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SIXTH TALK

THE SELF-EVIDENT TRUTHFULNESS OF THE  
GOSPEL STORIES OF THE RESURRECTION

In our address of yesterday we began the con­sideration of the question, “Did Jesus really rise from the dead?” We started out without assum­ing anything whatever; we did not assume that the four Gospels were true; we did not assume that the four Gospels were written by the men whose names they bear; we did not even assume that they were written in the century in which the events recorded were alleged to have occurred, nor the next century, nor the next. We started with the well-known fact that we have the four Gospels. Whether true or false, and whoever may have written them, we certainly have them. We laid these four Gospels side by side and tried to discover from the study of them whether they were the record of events that actually occurred, or whether they were fiction. The first thing that we discovered was that they were separate and independent accounts. We saw that they must either be a true record of facts or else fiction; that if fiction they must have been fabricated in one of two ways, either inde­pendently of one another, or else in collusion with one another. We saw that they could not have been fabricated in collusion, the apparent discre­pancies were too numerous and too noticeable; we saw that they could not have been made up inde­pendently, the agreements were too marked and too many. Not made up in collusion, not made up independently, then not made up at all—that is, they contain a true relation of facts as they actually occurred. We saw, in the next place, that each of the Gospel accounts bore striking indications of having been derived from eye-witnesses. We noted, in the third place, their artlessness, straightforward­ness, and simplicity. We saw that it often happens that when a witness is on the stand, the story he tells is so artless, straightforward, simple, and natural that it carries conviction regardless of any know­ledge we may have of the witness or of his previous character. We saw that each one of the Gospel stories had these characteristics which were clear proof of the truthfulness of the stories recorded. We noticed, in the next place, the unintentional evidence of words, phrases, and accidental details. We saw that it often happens that when an eye­witness is on the stand that the unintentional evidence he bears by words, phrases, and accidental details is more effective than his direct testimony, because it is not the testimony of the witness, but the testimony of the truth to itself. We gave a number of illustrations of this; we are to give still more today.

Turn to John xx. 24, 25, “But Thomas, one of the twelve, called Didymus, was not with them when Jesus came. The other disciples therefore said unto him, We have seen the Lord. But he said unto them, Except I shall see in His hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails, and thrust my hand into His side, I will not believe.” How true this all is to life. It is in perfect harmony with what is told us of Thomas elsewhere. Thomas was the chronic doubter in the apostolic company, the man who always looked upon the dark side, the man who was governed by the testimony of his senses. It was he who, when Jesus said, in John xi. 15, that He was going again into Judea, despondently said, “Let us also go that we may die with Him.” It was he again who, in John xiv. 4, 5, when Jesus said, “Whither I go ye know the way,” replied, “Lord, we know not whither Thou goest, and how can we know the way?” And it is he that now says, “Except I shall see in His hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails, and thrust my hand into His side, I will not believe.” Is this made up, or is it life? To make it up would require a literary art that im­measurably exceeded the possibilities of the author.

Turn again to John xx. 4-6: “So they ran both together: and the other disciple did outrun Peter, and came first to the sepulchre. And he, stooping down and looking in, saw the linen clothes lying; yet went he not in. Then cometh Simon Peter following him, and went into the sepulchre.” This is again in striking keeping with what we know of the men. Mary, returning hurriedly from the tomb, bursts in upon the two disciples, and cries, “They have taken away the Lord out of the sepulchre, and we know not where they have laid Him.” John and Peter spring to their feet, and run at the top of their speed for the tomb. John was the younger of the two disciples. We are not told this in the narrative, but we learn it from other sources. Being younger, he was fleeter of foot and outran Peter, and reached the tomb first; but, man of retiring and reverent disposition, he did not enter the tomb, but simply stooped down and looked in. But im­petuous older Peter comes lumbering along behind as fast as he can, but when once he reaches the tomb he never waits a moment outside, but plunges headlong in. Is this made up, or is it life? He was indeed a literary artist of consummate ability who had the skill to make this up if it did not happen just so. There is also incidentally a touch of local accuracy in the report. When one visits today the tomb which scholars now accept as the real burial place of Christ, he will find himself unconsciously obliged to *stoop down* to look in.

Turn again to John xxi. 7: “Therefore that dis­ciple whom Jesus loved saith unto Peter, It is the Lord. Now when Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he girt his fisher’s coat unto him (for he was naked), and did cast himself into the sea.” Here again we have the unmistakable marks of truth and life. Recall the circumstances. The Apostles have gone at Jesus’ commandment into Galilee to meet Him there. Jesus does not at once appear. Simon Peter, with the fisherman’s passion still strong in his bosom, says, “I go a-fishing!” The others say, “We also go with thee.” They fished all night and caught nothing. In the early dawn Jesus stands upon the shore, but the disciples do not recognise Him in the dim light. Jesus says to them., “Children, have ye aught to eat?” And they answer, “No.” He bids them cast the net on the right side of the boat and they will find. When the cast was made, they are not able to draw it for the multitude of fishes. In an instant John, the man of quick, spiritual perception, says, “It is the Lord.” No sooner does Peter, the man of impulsive action, hear this, than he grips his fisher’s coat and throws it about his naked form, and throws himself overboard and strikes out for shore to reach his Lord. Is this made up, or is it life? This is no fiction. If some unknown author of the fourth Gospel made this up, he is the master literary artist of the ages, and we should take down every other name from the literary pantheon and place his above them all.

Take another illustration, John xx. 15: “Jesus saith unto her, Woman, why weepest thou? whom seekest thou? She, supposing Him to be the gardener, saith unto Him, Sir, if thou have borne Him hence, tell me where thou have laid Him, and I will take Him away.” Here is surely a touch that surpasses the art of any man of that day, or any day. Mary had gone into the city and notified Peter and John that she had found the sepulchre empty. They start on a run for the sepulchre. As Mary has already made the journey twice, they easily far outstrip her; but wearily and slowly she makes her way back to the tomb. Peter and John have been long gone when she reaches it. Broken­hearted, thinking that the tomb of her beloved Lord has been desecrated, she stands without, weeping. There are two angels sitting in the tomb, one at the head and the other at the feet where the body of Jesus had lain, but the grief- stricken woman has no eye for angels. They say unto her, “Woman, why weepest thou?” She replies, “Because they have taken away my Lord, and I know not where they have laid Him.” A footfall is heard in the leaves at her back, and she turns herself about to see who is coming. She sees Jesus standing there, but, blinded by tears and despair, she does not recognise her Lord. Jesus says unto her, “Why weepest thou? Whom seekest thou?” She supposes it is the gardener who is talking to her, and says, “Sir, if thou have borne Him hence, tell me where thou hast laid Him, and I will take Him away.” Now remember who it is that makes the offer, and what she offers to do; a weak woman offers to carry away a full-grown man. Of course she could not do it, but how true to a woman’s love that always forgets its weakness and never stops at impossibilities. There is something to be done, and she says, “I will do it.” “Tell me where thou hast laid Him, and I will take Him away.” Is this made up? Never! This is life! This is reality! This is truth!

Take still another illustration, Mark xvi. 7: “But go your way, tell His disciples and Peter that He goeth before you into Galilee: there shall ye see Him, as He said unto you.” “But go your way, tell His disciples *and Peter.*” What I wish you to notice here are the two words, “and Peter.” Why “and Peter?” Was not Peter one of the disciples? Surely he was, the very head of the apostolic company. Why then “and Peter”? No explana­tion is vouchsafed in the text, but reflection shows that it was the utterance of love towards the despondent, despairing disciple, who had thrice denied his Lord. If the message had simply been to the disciples, Peter would have said, “Yes, I was once a disciple, but I can no longer be counted such; I thrice denied my Lord on that awful night with oaths and cursings, it doesn’t mean me,” but our tender, compassionate Lord through His angelic messengers sends the message, “Go, tell His disciples, and whoever you tell, be sure you tell poor, weak, faltering, broken-hearted Peter.” Is this made up, or is this a real picture of our Lord? I pity the man so dull that he can imagine that this is fiction. Incidentally let it be noticed that this is recorded only in the Gospel of Mark, which, as is well known, is Peter’s Gospel. As Peter dictated to Mark what he should record, with tearful eyes and grateful heart he would turn to him and say, “Mark, be sure you put that in, ‘ Tell His disciples *and Peter.*’”

Turn now to John xx. 27-29: “Then saith He to Thomas, Reach hither thy finger, and behold My hands; and reach hither thy hand, and thrust it into My side: and be not faithless, but believing. And Thomas answered and said unto Him, My Lord and my God. Jesus saith unto him, Thomas, because thou hast seen Me, thou has believed: blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed.” Note here both the action of Thomas and the rebuke of Jesus. Each is too characteristic to be attributed to the art of some master of fiction. Thomas had not been with the disciples at the first appearance of our Lord. A week has passed by, another Lord’s Day has come. This time Thomas makes sure of being present; if the Lord is to appear he will be there. If he had been like some modern sceptics he would have taken pains to be away, but doubter though he was, he was an honest doubter, and wanted to know. Suddenly Jesus stands in the midst. He says to Thomas, “Reach hither thy finger, and behold My hands; and reach hither thy hand, and thrust it into My side: and be not faithless, but believing.” Thomas’ eyes are opened at last. His faith long dammed back bursts every barrier, and sweeping on carries Thomas to a higher height than any other disciple had gone yet —exultingly and adoringly he cries, as he looks up into the face of Jesus, “My Lord and my God.” Then Jesus tenderly, but oh how searchingly, rebukes him. “Thomas,” He says, “because thou hast seen Me, thou hast believed: blessed are they” (who are so eager to find and so quick to see and so ready to accept the truth that they do not wait for ocular demonstration, but are ready to take truth on sufficient testimony) “that have not seen, and yet have believed.” Is this made up, or is this life? A record of facts as they occurred, or a fictitious production of some master artist?

Turn now to John xxi. 21, 22: “Peter seeing him saith to Jesus, Lord, and what shall this man do? Jesus saith unto him, If I will that he tarry till I come what is that to thee? follow thou Me.” Let us get the setting of these words. The disciples are on the beach of Galilee, breakfast is over, Jesus has told Peter how he is to glorify Him in a martyrs death. Jesus then starts to walk down the beach, and says to Peter, “Follow Me.” Peter starts out to follow, but looking back over his shoulder to see what others were doing he sees John also following. With characteristic curiosity he says, “Lord, if I am to die for Thee, what shall this man do?” Jesus never answered questions of mere speculative curiosity regarding others, but pointed the questioner to his own duty. On another occasion (Luke xiii. 23, 24), when one came to Him with the question, “Are they few that be saved?” He replied to the question by telling them to see that they are saved themselves. So now He points curious Peter away from questions that do not concern him regarding others to His own immediate duty. He says, “If I will that he tarry till I come what is that to thee? follow thou Me.” Is this made up, or is this life and reality?

Turn to other verses in the same chapter, John xxi. 15-17: “So when they had dined, Jesus saith to Simon Peter, Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou Me more than these? He saith unto Him, Yea, Lord; Thou knowest that I love Thee. He saith unto him, Feed My lambs. He saith to him again the second time, Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou Me? He saith unto Him, Yea, Lord; Thou knowest that I love Thee. He saith unto him, Feed My sheep. He saith unto him the third time, Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou Me? Peter was grieved because He said unto him the third time, Lovest thou Me? And he said unto Him, Lord, Thou knowest all things; Thou knowest that I love Thee. Jesus saith unto him, Feed My sheep?” What I wish you to note especially here are the words, “Peter was grieved because He said unto him the third time, Lovest thou Me?” Why did Jesus ask Peter three times, “Lovest thou Me? “And why was Peter grieved because Jesus did ask him three times. We are not told in the text, but if we read it in the light of Peters thrice-repeated, three­fold denial of His Lord, we will understand it. As Peter had denied his Lord thrice, Jesus three times gives Peter an opportunity to reassert his love, but this all, tender as it was, brings back to Peter that awful night when in the courtyard of Annas and Caiaphas he had thrice denied his Lord, and Peter was grieved because He said unto him the third time, “Lovest thou Me?” Is this made up? Did the writer make it up with this fact in view? If he did, he surely would have mentioned it. No, this is no fiction, this is simply reporting what actually occurred. The accurate truthfulness of the record comes out even more strikingly in the Greek than in the English version. Two different words are used for love. Jesus, in asking Peter “Lovest thou Me?” uses a strong word of a higher form of love. Peter replying, “Lord, Thou knowest I love Thee,” uses a weaker word, but a more tender word (I am fond of Thee). Jesus the second time uses the stronger word, “Lovest thou Me?” and a second time Peter replies, using the weaker word. In His third question Jesus comes down to Peter’s level, and uses the weaker word that Peter had used, and Peter replies, “Lord, Thou knowest all things; Thou knowest that I love Thee,” using the same weaker word.

Notice again the appropriateness of the way in which Jesus revealed Himself to different persons after His resurrection. To Mary He reveals Himself simply by calling her by name. Read John xx. 16, “Jesus saith unto her, Mary. She turned herself, and saith unto Him, Rabboni; which is to say, Master.” What a delicate touch of nature we have here. Mary, as we saw a few moments ago, is standing outside the tomb overcome with grief. She has not recognised her Lord though He has spoken to her; she has mistaken Him for the gardener. She has said, “Sir, if thou hast borne Him hence, tell me where thou hast laid Him, and I will take Him away.” Then Jesus utters just one word; He says, “Mary.” As that name came trembling on the morning air, uttered with the old familiar tone, spoken as no one else had ever spoken it but He, in an instant her eyes are opened, she falls at His feet and tries to clasp them, and looks up into His face and cries, “Rabboni; my Master.” Is that made up? No, this is life, this is Jesus, and this is the woman who loved Him. No unknown author of the second, third or fourth century has produced such a masterpiece as this. We stand here unquestionably face to face with reality, with life, with Jesus and Mary, as they actually were.

To the two on the road to Emmaus He made Himself known in the breaking of bread. Read Luke xxiv. 30, 31, “And it came to pass, as He sat at meat with them, He took bread, and blessed it, and brake, and gave to them. And their eyes were opened, and they knew Him: and He vanished out of their sight.” They knew Him in the break­ing of bread. Why? The evangelist ventures no explanation, but it is not hard to read between the lines and find the explanation. In each one of the Gospels emphatic mention is made of Jesus return­ing thanks at meals. There was something so characteristic in the way He returned thanks at meals, so real, so different from the way in which they had ever seen any other man do it, there was such an evident approach into the very presence of God so utterly unlike the formality and unreality of others at such a time, that the moment Jesus lifted up His eyes and gave thanks, their eyes were opened—and they knew Him. This too is reality and life, not fiction.

To Thomas, the man governed by the senses, He made Himself known by exhibiting the very print of the nails in His hands and the hole in His side. To John and Peter, He made Himself known as at the beginning in the miraculous draught of fishes. Everywhere in each minute detail the narrative has a consistency and a truth to life that makes the supposition of fiction impossible.

Take one more illustration. Read carefully John xx. 7, “And the napkin that was about His head, not lying with the linen clothes, but wrapped to­gether in a place by itself.” How strange that such a little detail as this should be added to the story with absolutely no attempt of saying why, but how deeply significant this little unexplained detail is. When I was studying in the theological semi­nary, an upper classman came home one Sunday afternoon from his Bible class much disgusted. He had a class of working girls about twenty years of age. He said, “One of my scholars asked me a stupid question today; she asked me if there was any significance in the napkin being wrapped to­gether in a place by itself. How stupid, as if there was any significance in that!” But in reality it was not stupid working girl, but stupid theologue. There is the deepest significance in it. Jesus Christ is dead. For three days and three nights, from Wednesday evening at sunset till Saturday evening at sunset, His body has lain cold and silent in the sepulchre, as truly dead as any body was ever dead, but at last the appointed hour has come, the breath of God sweeps through the sleeping and silent clay, and in that supreme moment of His own earthly life, that supreme moment of human history, when Jesus rises triumphant over death and Satan, there is no excitement upon His part, but with that same majestic self-composure and serenity that marked His whole career, the same divine calm that He displayed upon storm-tossed Galilee when His affrighted disciples shook Him from His slumbers and said, “Lord, carest Thou not that we perish?” and He arose serenely on the deck of the tossing vessel and said to the raging waves and winds, “Be still!” and there was a great calm, so now again in this sublime, this awful moment, He does not excitedly tear the napkin from His face and throw it aside, but absolutely without human haste or flurry or disorder He takes it calmly from His head, rolls it up, and lays it away in an orderly manner by itself. Was that made up? Never! Never! We do not behold here a delicate master­piece of the romancer’s art—we read here the simple narrative of a matchless detail in a unique life that was actually lived here upon earth, a life so exquisitely beautiful that one cannot read it with an honest and open mind without feeling the tears coming to his eyes.

But some one will say, “These are little things.” True, but it is from that very fact that they gain very much of their significance. It is in just such little things that the fiction would disclose itself. Fiction displays its difference from fact in the minute. In the great outstanding outlines you can make fiction look like truth, but when you come to examine it minutely and microscopically, you will soon detect that it is not reality but fabrication; but the more microscopically we examine the Gospel narratives, the more we become impressed with their truthfulness. The artlessness and naturalness and self-evident truthfulness of the narratives down to the minutest detail surpasses all the possibilities of art.

In our next Talk we shall consider the circum­stantial evidence for the resurrection of Christ.