

“Eternal Life” in the Plan of St. John’s Gospel.

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THE rationale of the Gospel of St. John lies in the words contained in chapter xx. 30-31: “Many other signs therefore did Jesus in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book: but these are written, that ye may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye may have Life in His Name.”

Accepting Bishop Westcott’s idea of the date of the gospel as “in the last decennium of the first century and even to the close of it,” it is conceivable that St. John must have felt his hold on life growing feebler as age produced a weakening of his physical powers. When his face was turned, however, towards the setting sun, and he was reaching out to a fuller life in the Presence of God, he determined to record for others certain facts which would show the reason for the hope that was in him.

Hence his deliberate statement—*i.e.*, certain signs are recorded, out of the “many” which our Lord performed, for the express purpose of producing belief; this resultant belief is to the effect “that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God,” and from this belief there ensues life.

The opening chapter of the Gospel contains, by way of introduction, a preliminary statement of St. John’s own belief, an affirmation, and a proof. In the first verses there is St. John’s statement of the eternity of the Logos with God (i. 1 and 2), followed by the fact of the creative power of the Logos (i. 3). To this is added that in the Logos was Life (i. 4)—thus definitely associating the Logos with God as “the fountain of Life” (*cf.* Ps. vi. 9)—and declaring further that those who received the Logos, or believed on His name, had the competency (*ἐξουσία*) to become “children of God” (i. 12), and so to attain to the light of life (i. 5, *κατέλαβεν*).

Following this introductory statement of the possibility of man entering into a filial relationship with God through believing

on the Logos, comes a preliminary affirmation from the lips of John the Baptist. St. John himself had identified the Logos with God (i. 18—*μονογενὴς Θεός*); the Baptist advances further by linking the Logos with Christ, the hope of Israel (i. 23; *cf.* the statement of Andrew, John's disciple—i. 41); and finally enunciates the world-wide significance of Christ the Logos and Hope of Israel (i. 29).

To this preliminary statement and affirmation are added signs in corroboration and proof—*i.e.*, the dialogue with Peter revealed the latter's character and unfolded his future position. This is followed by the ready obedience of Philip to the simple words "Follow me"—easy of understanding when one remembers the close link between Peter and Philip (i. 44)—and his identification of "Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of Joseph," with the Messiah or Christ, "of whom Moses in the law, and the prophets, did write." This sign is supplemented by that of reading the mind of Nathaniel when brooding under the fig-tree (i. 48); and from the lips of the new disciple come the words of which he hardly understood the full meaning, and which by design are recorded here, "Thou art the Son of God, Thou art King of Israel." It was a full statement of the belief which it was the purpose of the writer of the Gospel to achieve, and which had its fulfilment in the words of St. Thomas later (xx. 28). Hence the significance of the closing words of the opening section—*i.e.*, "Ye shall see the heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man," for they enunciate the truth stated in the first chapter and amplified throughout the Gospel—*viz.*, that Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah, the Hope of Israel and of the world, that He was "indeed one with God, the source of Life, and that through Him the possession of Life was possible to all men. Truly, therefore, the heaven was opened, space had become annihilated, for now the aspirations of human hearts could ascend direct to the throne of God, from whom Life was made sure to humanity through the person of Jesus Christ.

The whole of the Gospel is now concerned with showing how

this link between earth and heaven became a reality—*i.e.*, how the signs produced belief in Jesus Christ as the Son of God, and how this belief brought Life.

The theme proper of the Gospel begins with the inaugural sign at Cana of Galilee. At the outset of His mission, Christ gives a proof of His sovereign power over the world of nature. The absence of any psychic mediation, possible in a miracle of healing, made this particular miracle a heralding sign, for it proclaimed emphatically the divine power of Christ over the natural world. Concurrent with this, however, went the truth of which the miracle was itself the sign—*viz.*, that in Christ was a transforming power, and that He was able to change the simpler and lower element into the richer and higher. Hence the significance of (ii. 11): "This beginning of His signs did Jesus in Cana of Galilee, and manifested His glory; and His disciples believed on Him." The inaugurating sign had done its work at least for them, for they now gave absolute trust to Him who had proved Himself to be the Lord of nature.

By contrast with this complete trust and belief of the disciples is placed the limited belief of the Jews generally. In the cleansing of the Temple and in the prediction of the Resurrection, they had a sign—both actual and verbal—of the revelation of Christ as the fulfilment of the hope of Israel (ii. 13-22), whilst the "signs," performed significantly enough "in Jerusalem at the Passover" (ii. 23), simply tended to emphasize this revelation. The result was a belief "on His name" (ii. 23), a recognition of Jesus as the Messiah, though without any deep trust in Him personally—as verses 24, 25 imply. (The Greek text brings this out significantly—*i.e.*, πολλοὶ ἐπίστευσαν εἰς τὸ ὄνομα αὐτοῦ . . . ὁ Ἰησοῦς οὐκ ἐπίστευεν ἑαυτὸν αὐτοῖς.)

Having proclaimed by the preliminary sign at Cana His power over the world of nature, and having also secured the personal belief of the disciples and Jews in their respective degrees, Christ is now shown directing men to the deeper truth, of which the first miracle was a sign. Nicodemus is attracted to

our Lord by the sign (iii. 2), and it is very significant how Christ immediately goes to the root of the fundamental necessities of man by explicitly enunciating what the first sign proclaimed in symbol. In iii. 3 is laid down the prime necessity of mankind—*i.e.*, that “except a man be born from above, he cannot see the Kingdom of God”; if his moral nature is so to develop that he may be fit to stand in the presence of God, then it is necessary to attach his life to a new source, to transfer the inspiration of his being from earth to heaven. This necessity finds its corroboration in iii. 5. Whatever limitation the possible interpretation “except a man be born anew” instead of “be born from above” might have, is nullified by the unequivocal statement of iii. 5: “Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the Kingdom of God.” The first phrase “born of water,” as the Jewish symbol of repentance, expresses the cutting of one self loose from one’s earthly moral aspirations; whilst the second phrase, “born of the Spirit,” emphasizes the necessary corollary—*i.e.*, the opening of our nature to the nature of God, the need of life which has its origin in the Spirit of God, the necessity of a new mode of being, different from the life which is “born of the flesh.” How such a miraculous birth and life—already mentioned (i. 12)—was possible, is now clearly and definitely stated (iii. 13-16), *i.e.*, the Son of Man who Himself had come “from above” from the presence of God, had been sent by God Himself that “whosoever believeth on Him” could “in Him have eternal life.”

This epoch-making statement of One who came from God to be the personal link between God and man, to bridge the gap between earth and heaven, and to secure eternal life for men by belief in Himself, is so striking to St. John that he here introduces (iii. 27-36) the testimony of the Baptist to the truth of the statement. John (the Baptist) first lays down in reference to the attractive influence of Christ (iii. 26) that such power in Christ was “given him from heaven” (iii. 27), that Christ “came from above” (iii. 31), speaking the words of God who sent Him (iii. 34), and that belief on the Son brought with it

eternal life (iii. 36). The whole is in the nature of a parenthetical statement in support of the stupendous truth enunciated by Christ to Nicodemus, the exact bearing of which was to be unfolded in the succeeding narrative.

The interview of Nicodemus with our Lord had been used by the latter to bring out quite clearly the manward side of the problem how man could secure eternal life (*cf.* iii. 3, 5); the interview with the woman of Samaria served to reveal the Godward aspect of the matter. The limitations of sinful human nature, of which Nicodemus had been reminded, are now mentioned rather to prepare the way for the declaration of what God would do to supply human needs. Thus, the irreconcilability of human nature in the person of Jew and Samaritan (iv. 9) heralds the statement concerning the "gift of *God*" to satisfy human needs (iv. 10); then the mention of human wants (iv. 13) merely prepares the way for the offer by Christ in person of "a well of water springing up into eternal life" (iv. 14). Following this comes a clearing up of ideas with reference to God, showing that the essential nature of God is Spirit, and that Spirit, therefore, is the pre-requisite for those who desire worship or union with Him (iv. 23, 24; *cf.* iii. 5). The whole is crowned by the self-revelation of Christ (iv. 25, 26) in which He reveals Himself as the One who will show "all things" of God to man.

The preliminary bearing and influence of the first sign ends here. Our Lord, who had shown his power in changing water into a richer and higher element, used the sign to show that man also needed a change in his nature, and required the source of his life to be fixed "above" if he would see the Kingdom of God and obtain eternal life. He then pointed out how this human need had been met on God's side by the gift of Christ Himself, who had come into the world to reveal to man how this change could take place.

The narrative now proceeds to show how "the gift of God" can be appropriated by man to supply his need and secure to him Life. Thus the writer introduces the second sign (iv. 46-54).

It is noticeable here that the nobleman had a certain faith or belief in Christ, otherwise he would not have made the request "to come down and heal his son." The faith, however, was limited to belief in the personal presence of Christ to achieve a certain end, "come down [Thyself] ere my child die." The request might have involved no more than one's faith to-day in a particular physician to cure a malady, and whose presence would accordingly be necessary at the bedside of the patient. Hence the crucial words of Christ, "Go thy way; thy son liveth:" they were calculated to raise in the mind of the man a deeper sense of the power of our Lord, they were also used to raise in the nobleman profounder ideas of the person of Christ; but their primary purpose was to teach him the real meaning of faith in Christ. So when the father knew that his son's cure "was at that hour in which Jesus said unto him, Thy son liveth, and himself believed," he learned that the blessing of Life is appropriated by faith in Christ.

The sign which follows carries this truth a little further. True it is that Life is appropriated by faith in Christ, but the third sign makes it clear that human nature, though vitiated and corrupted by sin, can also appropriate the blessing of Life through faith in our Lord.

This fact is made clear by v. 14 and v. 6. In the former verse the man is told to "sin no more lest a worse thing befall" him; his sin it was, therefore, which had reduced him to physical incompetency and sapped the spring of his life. Concurrent with this had been a moral turpitude as well; the man had acquiesced so long in his sin and in the result of his sin, that the very unusual question is put as to whether he is willing to be made whole (v. 6). For thirty-eight years the man had abandoned hope, but now, at the command of Christ, his moral sense is roused and he stands upright on his feet, sound in body and mind.

The sign itself brought our Lord into contact with the Jews because of its apparent violation of the Sabbath, but it is significant how our Lord, in the apologia which He put forward,

simply used the sign as an example of the life-giving work which He had come to do. In v. 20 the sign is described as one of the *ἐργά*, or wonders which God works, it is pointed out that the normal work of God and the Son is to "quicken" or "make alive" (v. 21), whilst the general statement is made that knowledge of the revelation made by the Son and belief in the Father who speaks through the Son, gives eternal life and passes men from death to life (v. 24-26). Humanity debased by sin can appropriate the blessing of eternal life—such is the reading of the third sign.

The enunciation of this particular principle and fact, wide-reaching as it is, had a very obvious difficulty along with it. Granted that man needs linking with "above," that God has given "the gift" of Christ, that the blessing of life can be appropriated by faith in Him, and that even the most debased can be quickened by faith in Him, the question naturally arises, *How* is it possible for man to obtain a new source of Life in Christ? How can belief in Christ "quicken" and give Eternal Life? This is the problem which St. John proceeds to unravel.

Certain signs performed on the sick (vi. 2), and of which no particulars are given, had the effect of attracting a great multitude to the presence of Christ. Lack of food on the part of the people and the questioning as to the possibility of feeding them (vi. 5-9) were simply the prelude to the sign by which our Lord fed to repletion the five thousand men with the five barley loaves and two fishes. The sign made it quite clear that Christ was the Divine Giver of sustenance.

Following immediately upon this comes the sign—limited to the disciples—in which Christ walked upon the sea, overcame the violence of wind and waves, and straightway caused their boat to be "at the land whither they were going" (vi. 16-21). The sign was comprehensive; it showed that Christ's presence was not limited by sensible or material obstacles, and that His power was not conditioned by earthly things.

The application or interpretation of both these signs comes in the succeeding verses. The people who had been the

participants in the sign of the five barley loaves and the two fishes, found Christ at Capernaum, and were greeted with the words, "Ye seek me, not because ye saw the signs, but because ye ate of the loaves and were filled" (vi. 26). They were attracted by the fact that Christ had been able to satisfy a material need, and that He had thus demonstrated Himself to be the Divine Giver of sustenance. Our Lord, however, points them to a food other than material, "work not for the meat which perisheth, but for the meat which abideth unto eternal life, which the Son of Man shall give unto you" (vi. 27). The questionings of the Jews with reference to "Manna" and "bread from heaven" (vi. 31) revealed that they understood the drift of His words, and so our Lord became more explicit and declared that "The bread of God is that which cometh down out of heaven and giveth life unto the world" (vi. 33). When the longings of their souls burst forth in the words "Lord evermore give us this bread," then in response came the unequivocal statement: "I am the bread of life, he that cometh to Me shall not hunger, and he that believeth on Me shall never thirst" (vi. 35). "I am the living bread which came down out of heaven: if any man shall eat of this bread, he shall live for ever: yea, and the bread which I will give is My flesh, for the life of the world" (vi. 51). Christ has shown in the sign (vi. 5-14) that He was able Himself to supply the material needs of men, that He was the Divine Giver of sustenance for daily life; the words following on the sign reveal Him as one who could give a sustenance which should be eternal in its power; in some mysterious way Christ offered Himself, His "flesh" as the "living bread" for "the life of the world" (vi. 51).

It is now, however, that the significance of the fifth sign (vi. 16-21) appears. Our Lord had there shown that His presence was not limited by material obstacles, but rather that His power was manifested through them. So now the same truth appears in His explanation to the Jews as to how they could feed on Him.

It is quite probable that the Jews had no difficulty in under-

standing the meaning of the term "bread from heaven," for it was in the same category as "living water," "wells of water springing up into everlasting life," and the like, all of which were traditionally associated with the Torah (*cf.* "Midrash Shir Rabba," i. 2: "As water refreshes the body, so does the Torah refresh the soul"; "Midrash Sifre," 84a: "As water gives life to the world, so do the words of the Torah give life—*i.e.*, eternal life—to the world"; "Bab. Talm. Shabboth," 120a, refers to the "bread of the Torah" as "spiritual food"). They were also conversant with the tradition that in the Messianic era the people would feed upon Leviathan and Behemoth (*cf.* "Syriac Apocalypse of Baruch," xxix. 3-8, Ps. lxxiv. 12-15, and Zeph. i. 7). The difficulty for the Jews therefore lay not so much in how one man could be assimilated by another, but rather how "this man" (vi. 52), "the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know" (vi. 62), could, like the Torah, become the vital principle in their lives—that to feed upon Him was to live eternally. Hence followed on the part of Christ a revelation of the mystery of His own life. The previous statement concerning eating His flesh is first of all reiterated (vi. 53), but He then proceeds to demonstrate how those who eat His flesh and drink His blood (vi. 54) secure for themselves eternal life. Christ declares that He has been sent into the world by the living God, and that the life of God is perfectly reproduced on earth in Himself (vi. 57); in other words, Christ is God living as man. From this it results that the man who "feeds" on Christ incorporates into himself the living God, and actually lives as Christ Himself lives (vi. 57).

Thus the symbolism which Christ uses explains itself, even apart from the traditional Jewish reference to the Torah and the Messianic era. To eat and to drink any substance is to incorporate that substance into one's being; and so to believe in Christ, in the full sense of the term, is to incorporate Him, as though by eating and drinking, into ourselves (*cf.* vi. 63, "It is the Spirit that quickeneth"; also vii. 37, 38, "He that believeth"; explaining the expression, "Come unto Me, and *drink*").

Hence our Lord has now made clear how belief in Himself can bring with it eternal life. "Belief" marks "fellowship," and belief in Christ therefore connotes fellowship and contact with the living God. Fellowship with the living God through Christ means inevitably, eternal life.

Thus the influence of the fourth and fifth signs is brought to a legitimate conclusion. In the former of the two Christ had demonstrated Himself as the Divine Giver of sustenance (vi. 1-14); He had now shown that He was the Giver of Divine sustenance (vi. 35, 51, etc.); in the latter of the two He had revealed that His presence and power were not limited by material agencies, and so He had shown that He Himself, the Giver of Divine sustenance, was capable of incorporation into the being of man, bringing life from God, the Source of Life (vi. 57).

The close of the interview brought with it the half-confession of St. Peter "in the Holy One of God" who "had words bringing eternal life" (vi. 68, 69), but it was quite clear that there were strong cross-currents of feeling amongst the Jews generally (vi. 66; vii. 5, 12). It was in answer to this hesitancy on the part of so many of the Jews that our Lord laid down the necessity of experimental knowledge, if the Jews would learn the truth of that to which He had given utterance, and of which the "signs" were token. "If any man willeth to do His will, He shall know" (vii. 17); the inner consciousness of man, as he obeys the voice of Christ through belief in Him, will convince him of the truth of that which Christ declares. But it is insistent that a man shall "will" to act in accordance with the invitation of Christ—that he shall "come" (vii. 37) unto Christ; when the manward side has been performed, then the Godward result will be made clear. This point of view is developed further by our Lord when He renews the acquaintance of His hearers, and declares: "I am the light of the world; He that followeth Me shall not walk in the darkness, but shall have the light of life" (viii. 12). In other words, He would say that just as darkness is not dispelled

and driven away by any mechanical process, but merely by kindling a flame, so life is created within us simply by admitting Him who is the Source of Life. To the difficulties raised by the Jews, Christ replies by referring them to the limitations of their own knowledge and position (viii. 14, 15, 23), and, on the other hand, to the fact that life is absolute in Himself. He declares: "He that sent Me is with Me" (viii. 29). "I came forth, and am come from God" (viii. 42), and, because of this relationship with God, therefore "before Abraham was, I am." Life is, in consequence, absolute and timeless in Christ—a fact which carries with it the result that, "if a man keep His word," the light from Christ will so illumine his being that he will know the meaning of absolute truth, and of absolute freedom, both moral and spiritual (viii. 32), and that, in consequence, he shall never see death (viii. 57).

(To be concluded.)

