

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

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(Concluded from p. 819.)

IT is obvious from John viii. 59 that there was no movement on the part of the Jews to follow the advice of Christ with reference to testing by personal experience the truth of His claims and offers to which the fourth and fifth signs had led. Hence there follows a sixth sign (ix. 1-7), calculated to draw closer attention to the offer of Christ as the Light and Life of the world (viii. 12).

In connection with this sign, it is noticeable in the first place how our Lord reiterates His statement that He is the Light of the world (ix. 5); what men had been slow previously to apprehend, He again proclaims as He proceeds to perform the sign. It is further noticeable what elaborate preparations were made by Christ before the sign was performed, in comparison with the spontaneity of the previous signs: *cf.* the spittle, the clay, the anointing, the journey to the Pool of Siloam for the purpose of washing (ix. 6, 7). It served to mark the difficulty encountered in bringing the Light of Life to those whose minds were darkened. The difficulty, however, only emphasized by contrast the subsequent condition of the man when his eyes were opened; but the significance of the sign lay in the fact that, although Christ had acted on the man, the latter had also acted both in going to Siloam and in the active faith which prompted him to go there, with the consequence that sight ensued. This aspect of the sign is apparent in the proceedings which followed.

The cross-examination of the healed man by the Pharisees made it clear that the latter had drifted even from their former position of incredulity, which had caused our Lord to insist on experimental knowledge as the proof of what He said, to a position of active opposition (ix. 34). For them, therefore, the sign had no enlightening influence (ix. 40, 41). The healed

man, however, had learned the lesson of the sign. In the presence of the Pharisees the sign itself forced him to some degree of belief in Christ as at least "a prophet" (ix. 17) and a "man from God" (ix. 33). When he came into the presence of Christ with his recovered sight, he was at once responsive to the question of his healer: "And who is He, Lord, that I may believe on Him?" (ix. 35, 36). And it is to this responsiveness of faith that Christ makes His definite offer of Himself as the object of personal faith: "Thou hast both seen Him, and He it is that speaketh with thee." Experimental faith, therefore, had brought the "blind" man into such close relationship with our Lord that his confession of belief in the Son of God (ix. 38) revealed how the light of the knowledge of Christ dispelled the darkness of ignorance, and brought him into close personal relationship of belief in Christ who is Life.

At this particular stage there comes the mark of deep and definite cleavage. The influence of the signs was meant to be positive; they were for the purpose of insuring a belief in Christ as the Son of God, and to bring Life to the believer in consequence. Step by step our Lord had tried, by means of them, to bring His hearers into the full light (chaps. vii. and viii.) of that for which He came into the world, but their influence had been negative as well as positive. A growing disbelief had been produced amongst many of the Jews, so that their refusal to obey our Lord's request for experimental test to realize that He was the Light and Life of men, accompanied as it was with a determined obscurantism against His teaching (*cf.* ix. 24), tended to cause an impassable breach between them and the influence of Christ. Hence occurs for the first time the note of separation (chap. x.). Our Lord still offers Himself as the Life of the world (x. 16); but if the world in general will not accept Him, then He must turn to individuals who will listen, and so teach them that in Him they may have eternal life. This is the line of thought which runs throughout the tenth chapter. He will call His own sheep by name, and lead them out (x. 3)—in contradistinction to the leaders of the Jews, whose influence

tended "to kill and destroy." He will lead forth those who hear His voice in order "that they may have life, and may have it abundantly" (x. 10). When they have come forth, and have been given eternal life, no other agency shall harm them; "they shall never perish, and no one shall snatch them out of My hand" (x. 27).

It was obvious that a crisis was at hand. The appeal to the *ἐργά* and signs was not calculated to produce dispassionate consideration from men who had descended to blasphemous abuse (x. 20, 21) and personal violence (x. 31, 39), but there were many Jews, even apart from the disciples, who had a certain belief in Christ (*cf.* x. 41, 42). It was to bring this imperfect faith to fruition that the great sign recorded in chapter eleven was performed (*cf.* xi. 15).

The first sign at Cana had demonstrated Christ's power over the world of Nature. The succeeding words with Nicodemus had revealed the necessity of birth "from above" and God's offer to supply it through Christ; this had been followed by demonstrating that faith was necessary to secure this new Life offered by Christ, and that even corrupt and sinful humanity could by faith appropriate the offered gift. This had again been followed by the signs revealing Christ as one who could give Divine sustenance which could be assimilated by every individual, and further by the sign which showed that experimentalism alone would demonstrate the illuminating and life-giving power of Christ. The seventh sign now reverts to the position taken up at Cana. There, without verbal introduction, Christ had shown His power over the world of Nature; now, in the same way, He will demonstrate the same power over human nature, to clinch His claims ere He closes His public revelation.

It is noticeable at the outset how our Lord implicitly infers that He has the power of Life and Death. In xi. 14, 15, He declares that Lazarus is dead, and that He is glad, for the sake of the disciples, that He was not present in answer to the appeal of the sisters (xi. 3). Had He been present He could have prevented the death of His friend; but His absence was

deliberate, "in order that the disciples might believe" (xi. 15), and that the Son of God should be glorified (xi. 4). The remarks of Christ reveal that there was a limitation in the belief even on the part of the disciples—a limitation which precluded the Son of God being glorified (xi. 4), and which, moreover, hindered their possession of eternal life. It is true that they did believe in Him in a certain sense. It is recorded, for example, in ii. 11 that "the disciples believed on Him," which expressed personal trust, at all events; and, again, in vi. 69, Peter goes so far as to say that Christ has "words of eternal life," and that He is "the Holy One of God." How far this belief was from the full acceptance of Christ as One with God, the Source of Life, and because of it giving Life Himself, is obvious, and is further demonstrated by the dialogue with Martha. The latter believes that in some way Christ had power over death, and could even give life: "If Thou hadst been here, my brother had not died" (xi. 21). The words which follow, however, show very clearly how imperfect her belief was—*i.e.*, "Even now I know that whatsoever Thou shalt ask of God, God will give it Thee." It was something to realize that she had the belief that Christ could in some way secure from God the great and miraculous boon of life for her dead brother; but the form of expression showed that she had not grasped the fact that Life was in Christ Himself. To her it was simply that Christ could, like a prophet of old, obtain His request from God, a request for which He must beg (*αἰτέω*, xi. 22, which implies dependence) just as ordinary men must beg (*cf.* xiv. 13; xv. 16; xvi. 23; contrast xvi. 26, *ἔρωτήσω*). So, again, her words in xi. 24 merely point to the general Pharisaic belief in a future Resurrection; there was no identification of her belief in eternal life with the Person of Christ. Hence our Lord directs her hope of life for the dead Lazarus to be obtained from God, and her general belief in a future Resurrection, to a belief in His Person. "I am the Resurrection and the Life: he that believeth on Me, though he die, yet shall he live; and whosoever liveth and believeth on Me shall

never die." She had been cherishing a truth somewhat in the form of a dogma. Christ asks her to cut herself loose from dogma and focus her belief upon Himself. Thus, in answer to Christ's question, comes the great confession: "I have believed that Thou art the Christ, the Son of God, even He that cometh into the world." Our Lord had become for her "the Christ," the fulfilment of Israel; He was now in her eyes the "Son of God," the completion of all Divine Revelation. He was the one "that cometh into the world," the expectation and salvation of the human race. Here, then, was a belief in Christ as a link between heaven and earth. Even yet, however, her faith was not full and complete, as xi. 39 clearly shows, the prevailing Jewish belief in the spirit departing from the body on the third day, and the proverbial idea about corruption setting in on the third day, being obviously stronger than her belief in Christ. The purpose of the seventh sign, therefore, was to raise faith to its proper level—*i.e.*, to faith in Christ personally as the Author and Giver of Life. He who raised the dead and gave back life to the dead body, surely He was the Author of Life, One with God, the Source of Life, and able to give Life to those who believed in Him.

Here, therefore, the signs cease, for the perfect number seven marked the perfect sign which fully revealed Christ as the Lord of Life. All the signs had in some way revealed Christ's power over Nature, both animate and inanimate, and the discourses connected therewith had been used to make clear the truth how man could gain Life for himself by belief in Christ. So before the tomb of Lazarus an ocular demonstration was given that our Lord had within Him the power to give Life, a sign which carried with it the necessary corollary that He could give Life to all who "believe in" or "had fellowship" with Him.

From this point the public revelation of Christ as the Giver of Life through belief in Himself as the Son of God draws to a close. Before withdrawing from the public view, however, Christ enunciated the principle of self-sacrifice by which He will be able to accomplish for men the life which He promises

(xii. 24, 25), a statement which brought with it a Divine attestation (xii. 28). In the narrower circle of the disciples this principle of self-sacrifice is made more explicit by the washing of the disciple's feet" (xiii. 1-12) and by insistence on the same spirit on the part of the disciples themselves (xiii. 12-14). The practical bearing of the section upon the general question is clear. Christ had by the seven great signs shown that He was the Lord of Life, and that "in Him was Life" for men. The influence of the signs had culminated in showing that faith in the Person of Christ was the pre-requisite to the possession of life, but this carried with it the difficulty that Christ could not always be bodily present to kindle faith in Himself personally, as in the case of Martha. So now our Lord shows how this difficulty is to be overcome. It is by the sacrifice of Himself (xii. 24, 25). When He is lifted up out of the earth He will be able to draw all men, irrespective of race or time, unto Himself (xii. 32) as the Giver of Life, by which the Son of Man, and God Himself, would be glorified (xiii. 31, 32). The words of Christ were obviously not fully comprehended by the disciples—as the remarks of Simon Peter reveal (xiii. 36-38)—the note of personal separation which our Lord had struck (xiii. 33, 36) gave no light to them concerning the great problem of how life was to be possible for all men through belief in Him. Hence the Upper Room discourses to the disciples in order to reveal fully this profound truth that "independent of physical presence or absence He will have in Himself for them (and for all men) life's inexhaustible supply."

The opening words used by our Lord in the Upper Room at once point the disciples to the profound truth which He desires to impress upon them, for xiv. 1-6 told them that it was not in heaven at some future date they were to find God and Eternal Life, but rather that through God in Christ they were to find heaven and Eternal Life now. This fact is summed up in xiv. 6. "I am the way" to the Father, declares Christ, the means by which two worlds are united, and by which men may pass from the one world to the other (*cf.* xiv. 9). "I am the

truth," in whom is revealed all that is eternal and absolute about God and heaven ; and because I am the Way and the Truth " I am the Life." To you I have given the open sight of God, and " because I live ye shall live also " (xiv. 19).

The significance of these opening words is unfolded in the section which introduces the simile of the vine and the branches. The disciples are there told that their life of union with Christ had begun, but was not yet perfected (xv. 1, 2) ; this union had already had a beneficial result for the disciples (xv. 3), but its full purport would only be realized as they maintained their union with Christ (xv. 7, 10). Yet the very necessity of maintaining this union with Christ brought with it the further necessity of Christ's departure. This had already been hinted at (vii. 33, 34), and is now made quite plain. It was clear that the bodily presence of Christ was limited both as to time and as to space. The bodily presence of Christ had been the means of showing the disciples, by His signs, the way to God, the truth of God, and the life of God ; but what of the time when the bodily presence was no more, and what of the people of that age and of subsequent ages for whom the bodily presence of Christ was an impossibility ? Hence the teaching that the absence of His bodily presence was essential for a new relationship by which His universal presence could be realized. This universal presence was to be realized through the agency of " another Advocate," and this " Advocate " was none other than the presence of Christ Himself in Spirit (xiv. 18), after His bodily departure had come about (xiv. 26 ; xvi. 7). The Spirit of God and of Christ was to be " called to the side " of men, to guide them into the truth of all that which Christ had been teaching (xiv. 17, 26 ; xvi. 13). Christ had come from the presence of God, as He had stated before ; He was now returning to the Father in heaven (xvi. 28) ; but the Holy Spirit (who already was abiding in them and already in them, xiv. 17, " He abideth with you and is in you ") would make manifest what Christ had taught—*i.e.*, that there was Life for those who believed in Him.

One notices incidentally from xvi. 30 how even yet there was a certain limitation in the belief of the disciples (as also xiv. 8, 9), but it was a distinct advance when they declared their solemn belief that Christ "came forth from God." They had a definite belief now in the Person of Christ who came from the presence of God. It was the purpose of Christ to show them how that belief in His Person could be maintained even in His absence. He had repeatedly revealed the union of the Father and Himself. He had also revealed the mystical union between Himself and those who believed in Him (chap. xv.); there follows the necessary consequence—viz., the mystical union between Father, Christ, and believers in Christ, the certainty of which is secured and made known to us by the Paraclete. This is brought out in xvii. 3: "This is life eternal, that they should know Thee the only true God, and Him whom Thou didst send, even Jesus Christ." The knowledge here spoken of is not simply verbal or mental, it rather denotes the perfect intuition which one person has of the being of another; it is the perfect understanding which follows "belief." Therefore "to know" the only true God is in a sense to be one with God, and "to know" Christ, to feel His Spirit and influence with them, was to be one with Christ and God who sent Him; and so the prayer of Christ would come true "that they may all be one, even as Thou, Father, art in Me, and I in Thee, that they also may be one in us" (xvii. 21). But this would only be realized for the disciples when the Spirit gave to men that perfect intuition, that "knowledge" of God (*cf.* xiv. 26, 21, 23). So Christ was to change His mode of being (*μεταβαίνω*, xiii. 1) that through the agency of the Holy Spirit the disciples and all men ultimately could "know the only true God and Jesus Christ whom He did send."

The close of the discourse brought the disciples to the grim method by which our Lord was to pass to His kingdom in the hearts of men, yet, even in the strangeness and apparent bathos of the Passion after the Upper Room, they could still discern certain patent facts. They would note the voluntariness of Christ's sufferings, and that He went forward to it in fulfilment

of the principle of self-sacrifice which He had previously signified in word (xii. 24, 25) and in deed (xiii. 1-10). (*Cf.* xviii. 4, 6, 11; xix. 28.) They would see also clear evidence of the definiteness with which Christ was moving to the realization of His universal presence for man in reference to His kingdom (xviii. 36), and to the absolute "truth" which His followers should know (xviii. 37), and also in the appeal to the inner consciousness of the Roman Governor (xviii. 37, 38; *cf.* vii. 17). But in the awful tragedy which seemed to crush out the hope, new born in men, of knowing God, there occurred the strange phenomenon which so keenly arrested the attention of St. John when the soldier pierced the side of Christ, "and straightway there came out blood and water" (xix. 34). To St. John it was the sign of life in death, for in some mysterious sense it showed the permanence of Christ's life even in death. It is in consequence of this that there come the words which tell of the growing perception of the deeper truth now being learned, "and he that hath seen hath borne witness, and his witness is true, and he knoweth that he saith true, that ye also may believe" (xix. 35). It needed but the evidence of the empty tomb to bring St. John himself to a true knowledge of that to which the signs and the Upper Room discourses had been pointing, and of which the "blood and water" was a token—viz., the absoluteness of life in the Person of Christ, and now "he saw and believed" (xx. 8), even before he had seen the risen Lord. That which to the unenlightened mind would have brought despair, was to him the key that unlocked all previous mysteries concerning life in Christ—the work of the Paraclete had begun (*cf.* also ii. 22; xii. 16).

In order to emphasize and clarify the conception which St. John now had, there are introduced the incidents connected with our Lord's post-Resurrection Presence. It is significant how, in the interview with Mary (xxi. 14-17), our Lord rejects her "physical" touch (xx. 17), because the time for such had gone with the Resurrection. But the spiritual contact has begun in its stead, for "I am ascending unto My Father and your

Father, and My God and your God" (xx. 17). The absolute life of Christ was returning to the presence of the Father from whence He came, the continuous and eternal life of Christ was departing to where He had "been in the beginning with God."

Before that event took place, however, there occurred the scene in the Upper Room (xx. 19-23), in which the dual aspect—Godward and Manward—was again revealed to show how the life of God could be man's. Our Lord first of all "breathed on them" (xx. 21)—from Himself He breathed forth on the disciples, associating them with His absolute life as the Risen One, and making them, by this symbolic act (*cf.* Gen. ii. 7), sharers in His glorified life, which was now ascending once more to God. Yet at the same time came the command, "Take ye (λάβετε) (the) Holy Spirit"; the personal action of the individual was necessary, because passivity has no place in realizing the presence of the Spirit of the Risen Christ. Paradoxical though it sounded, it was necessary to "take" in order to "receive" the sense of the Divine presence which the Spirit of Christ makes real to men.

With this pledge of the contact of the "spiritualized life" of Christ with those who believed on Him, the work of St. John draws to a close. But before the Ascension—spoken of as already taken place owing to the spiritualized state of Christ's Risen Body (xx. 17)—was really consummated, it was needful that the influence of the signs should have its ultimate purpose completely realized. Not once throughout the Gospel had our Lord spoken of Himself directly as God. The Evangelist had declared his own faith in Christ as God, at the outset of the Gospel, and Christ had frequently referred to God as His Father, and to His union with God, but not once had He declared Himself God. Now, however, in the interview with Thomas comes the full confession towards which the signs had been tending. The victory over death by the Resurrection, the proof of omniscience in knowing the thoughts of the absent disciple, and the sign of omnipotence in the "breathing forth"

of the Holy Spirit the week previous, were sufficient to bring Thomas to the full realization of the Divinity of Christ. No longer is it "Rabbi" or "Master," as in the former days, but full and absolute comes the confession, "My Lord and My God" (xx. 28).

It is here, therefore, that St. John draws to a conclusion, and inscribes the purpose of his writing (xx. 31). When the disciple had given expression to his faith in the person of Christ as God, in that confession and faith lay the fact of his own possession of eternal life through being linked on to the life of God Himself. Thomas only symbolized in his own person what is inherent in all mankind : that they have the competency (*ἐξουσία*) through faith in Christ—in whom, by the influence of the Paraclete, they may believe, though they have not seen Him (xx. 29)—to become sons of God and heirs of everlasting life. In the Upper Room the disciples had at length learned that "God became man, that man might become God," and that man might thus be partaker of the life which flows out from God.

