

## Studies in the Gospel of St. John.

### II.

**W**E have taken a general view of the Gospel as a whole, and in proceeding to look at it in detail, it is important to keep in mind the Purpose (xx. 31). Then we should recall how the Purpose is fulfilled by the Plan already given. The great division of the Gospel into its two parts (i.-xii. ; xiii.-xxi.) is the best general division, and this will follow the seven-fold outline before mentioned. Our present study will be concerned with a portion of the first main division, or sections one and two of the seven-fold outline.

#### I. THE PROLOGUE (ch. i. 1-18).

The Person whom the Gospel is to unfold is first declared and it is interesting to notice that theory is given first and then the record follows to prove it.

1. *The Word revealed* (i. 1-4). The Apostle first describes the Word in His Being (1, 2), and then in His working (3, 4). The term used by St. John, *Logos*, was doubtless familiar during the Apostle's life, and as St. Paul did not hesitate to use the philosophical and religious language of his day without adopting current ideas, so the Apostle John does the same, though giving the terminology a specific Christian meaning. "John is not so much concerned with the abstract philosophical conceptions, though he does outline a real philosophy of religion in these verses as he deals with the revelation of the nature of God in Christ the Logos and Son." The three statements concerning Christ in verse 1 are most embracing : (a) His eternal subsistence ; (b) His eternal relation to God ; (c) His eternal oneness with God. Nothing could well be plainer or more impressive than this foundation. This Divine Word is also the Creator, all things having been called into existence by His almighty power. And not only so, but since He was life, the life was the light of men.

2. *The Word rejected* (verses 5-11). Very soon the gloom of conflict is seen, but at the outset comes the assurance that the darkness cannot overtake and overcome the light. Then after this wondrous Being is conceived in terms of Divine personality, creative

agency, spiritual life, and moral light, suddenly a Divinely-appointed man is seen to appear (ver. 6), selected for the purpose of bearing witness to the Divine light, in order that man through faith might receive the life and enjoy its light. But notwithstanding the Divine profession of both Christ and His Forerunner, men did not know the Lord, and when He came did not, because they would not, receive Him. Thus at the very outset attention is called to the solemn fact of refusal and rejection which we know runs through this Gospel to the very end.

3. *The Word received* (verses 12-18). There were some, however, who did not refuse, for when He declared Himself they received Him and thereby obtained "authority" to become what they had not been before, "children of God," whose spiritual life was due to nothing human but solely to the Divine will. Then the Word of verse 1 is identified with the human Christ (ver. 14), and it is interesting to notice the parallels between the three statements of the former and the three of the latter verses: (a) (ver. 1) In the beginning was the Word: (ver. 14) and the Word became flesh. (b) And the Word was with God: and dwelt among us. (c) And the Word was God: full of grace and truth. Already some of the characteristic words of the Gospel have been used, like "life," "light," "darkness," "witness," "believe," "world," "faith." In verse 17 we have for the only time in the record of the history the "great historical Name," Jesus Christ, and it has been suggested that grace is associated with Him who is "Jesus" and truth with Him who is "Christ." We must also consider the four chief titles of our Lord here found: The Word; the Light; the Life; the Son. The meaning of each is important, and their order of usage is significant and suggestive.

## II. THE REVELATION OF THE SON OF GOD (i. 19-vi. 71).

It is important to note with all possible care and at every stage the selection of scenes in which Jesus Christ manifested Himself and the discussions during which the true meaning and solemn issues of His revelation were brought out.

1. *Faith begins in the disciples* (i. 19-ii. 12). St. John had spoken of the Baptist as the "witness," and now he proceeds to say what the witness is.

(a) The testimony of the first preacher (i. 19-37). When the committee from Jerusalem visited the Baptist they learnt with clearness the true meaning and relationship of him with the One

whose way he prepared. It is fitting that his testimony should commence the work, because his knowledge fits him for the special service. He first speaks of himself as not the Messiah, but only the one sent to prepare His way, and say that One infinitely greater than himself is among them. The deputation must have been puzzled at these remarkable statements; and then on the next day the Baptist identifies Jesus Christ as the Messiah by declaring Him to be "the Lamb of God that taketh away the sin of the world." Thus early is the thought of sacrifice for sin brought forward. But Christ is more than this, for He is the One who baptizes with the Holy Spirit. These two offices, indicating Redemption and Holiness, are inseparable, and they are based upon the fact that Christ is none other than "the Son of God" (ver. 34).

(b) The testimony of the first disciples (i. 38-51). This section is of particular interest on two main grounds. First, it shows the remarkable variety in our Lord's disciples, for the six men here mentioned or implied are seen in the sequel to be men of remarkably different temperaments and capacities. Then, too, the section is particularly interesting because of the varied methods by means of which these men came to Christ. Two of them came as the outcome of the Baptist's testimony. The next two came as the result of the personal influence of their brothers. The next came as the outcome of Christ's direct appeal. And the last came through the personal invitation of his friend who urged the necessity of experience as the one way of getting rid of prejudice.

(c) The testimony of the first miracle (ii. 1-11). In the Prologue the Apostle depicts the eternal Son of God becoming man in order to reveal the Father. Then follows the witness of the Baptist to the majesty, grace and holiness of the Son of God. Next comes, as we have just seen, the entrance into fellowship with Christ of the first band of believers, based on the conviction that He is their Messiah. Now follows the first manifestation of power on the part of Christ, showing that He is prepared to act like God and thereby reveal His Deity. The Apostle's designation of what we call miracles is "sign," indicating that what our Lord did was not merely a marvel but symbolical of something higher. This first miracle or "sign" was thus a manifestation of Christ's glory. He asked both from His mother and from the servants trust and obedience, and as a result He put forth power on behalf of the assembled

company. The outcome was that His disciples believed. They were deeply impressed by what they had seen, by His evident supremacy over nature as He had already shown over man. Authority, eliciting trust and obedience, will always result in joy, and the outcome will be the manifestation of glory.

2. *The first public manifestation* (ii. 13-iv. 54). The season of private and personal preparation is over, and it is necessary for Christ to present Himself to the Jewish nation. We may think of Israel at this time as socially barren, ecclesiastically formal and morally weak, and it was, therefore, as necessary as it was important for Christ to offer Himself to His people.

(a) In Judea (ii. 13-iv. 3). In Jerusalem our Lord claimed authority (ii. 13-22). He had already exercised it over human nature and over physical nature, and now He is brought face to face with the religious life of the people, and again asserts the right and power to deal with the most sacred realities of the national life. This, naturally, raises difficulties and even opposition, and again we see the two streams, or Rejection and Reception, which invariably marked His approach to the people. But even of those who believed, it could only be said that they were shallow even if sincere, and for this reason Christ did not entrust Himself unto them (ii. 23-25). Thus the chapter shows the threefold authority of Christ over nature, religion and the human intellect. But there was one man of those who were impressed by the miracle who, though like them, shallow and sincere, was evidently capable of receiving deeper things. And so we are told first of the "earthly thing," regeneration (iii. 1-10), and then of redemption, "the heavenly thing" (iii. 12-21). In the country of Judea John the Baptist's second and closing testimony to Christ was given. He repeated and completed his witness, speaking of himself as the friend of the Bridegroom, and rejoicing to know that while he himself would continually be decreasing, the Bridegroom, coming from above, would be constantly increasing because of what God was to Him in the fullness of life and power (iii. 22-36).

(b) In Samaria (iv. 4-42). After the south in Jerusalem and Judea, the next public revelation of Christ was given in the centre of the land, Samaria. It may only have been a geographical necessity for Him to go through Samaria (iv. 4), but it is more probably that a moral and spiritual obligation is to be understood.

The episode of the woman is another remarkable contrast with that of Nicodemus, showing the truth of the words: "There is no difference, for all have sinned" (Rom. iii. 22); "there is no difference, for the same Lord is rich unto all who call upon Him" (Rom. x. 12). Our Lord's interview and conversation with the woman shows how carefully He planned His approach to her, first winning her heart with His request for water, then impressing her mind with His teaching concerning Himself as the living water, then probing her conscience by a reference to her past life, and at last revealing Himself to her soul by the clear, full declaration of His Messiahship, which He would not tell the Jews. Then followed the interesting episode of the nobleman's faith which appropriately follows the faith of the Samaritan in Christ (iv. 42). "It is this fact of Christ in the realm of faith which is the golden thread upon which the incidents described in the Gospel are strung. It is illustrated in every chapter and it brings them all into a wonderful unity." The nobleman's trust is seen to develop along three clear stages. At first he only believes because of miracles. Then he rises higher and believes on the bare word of Christ. Then highest of all, he and his house believe as he has the consciousness that his son was alive. Thus Christ at once elicited and trained his faith.

3. *The crisis of manifestation* (v. 1-vi. 71). At this point the healing of the impotent man raised the entire question between Christ and the Jews, and it is particularly interesting to note with a thoughtful author, Dr. H. W. Clark, in his "The Christ from Without and Within," that at this point the Gospel enters upon an entirely new method. Up till now Christ has been considered from the spectators' standpoint, as though contemplating Him from outside and coming to the conclusion that He must be Divine. But at this stage the line of treatment changes, and from the beginning of chapter v. to the end of chapter x. John dwells "not in the consciousness of the spectators of Christ, but within the consciousness of Christ Himself. He has been speaking about Christ before: now Christ speaks for Himself." This is a very important point in the development of the thought of the Gospel, for instead of calling attention to what men saw and heard, these chapters reveal the inner mind and feeling of Christ, and instead of the impression of greatness made by His work, we are called upon to consider the greatness of His Person as revealed in His consciousness (Clark, p. 118).

The miracle served to bring to a head the opposition, and it is noteworthy that the controversy about the Sabbath was only the occasion of the infinitely greater controversy due to the claim of Christ implied in this alleged breach of the Sabbath (v. 18). The entire relation of the Father to Christ was thus raised, and in His controversy with the Jews our Lord claimed perfect oneness with the Father, perfect love between Him and the Father, and perfect submission of His will to God. There was not only the claim to this personal relation to the Father (v. 19-23), but arising out of it came the claim to a personal relation to man (v. 23-29), and last of all a claim connected with His own personal character (v. 30-47). The whole chapter is concerned with the great subject of life, and this life is seen to be in the Son (v. 26). It is also significant that the thought of "witness" becomes particularly clear and definite in this section (v. 31-40). We find included the witness of John, of the miraculous works, of the Father, and of the Scriptures, all being united in their definite and unmistakable testimony to Christ as the Son of God.

This opposition in Jerusalem (ch. v.) is soon followed by similar experience in Galilee (ch. vi.), where again a miracle becomes the occasion of discourses which accentuate the great hostility. The leaders of the nation at the capital had evidently been endeavouring to influence the people of the north in Galilee, and the feeding of the five thousand, the only miracle recorded in all four Gospels, is thereby seen to be a turning-point in the ministry. Once again the thought is of life, but there is a progress and development of the idea for, as in chapter v. Christ is the source of life, so here He is the sustenance. The discourse, or more correctly discourses, at Capernaum (vi. 25-71) are best understood in connection with the dialogues with the Jews, and when the subject is considered in this way the gradual growth of the opposition is seen. (a) The first stage was that of *discussion* (vi. 25-40), which ended with the claim by Christ to be the Heavenly bread. (b) This led at once to *dissatisfaction* (vi. 41-51), for the Jews murmured at this claim in view of what they believed they knew of His earthly origin and circumstances. But Christ in reply did not mitigate but intensified His claim by saying that the bread was His flesh. (c) The outcome of this was *dissension* (vi. 52-59), for the Jews now strove with one another, being horrified at the very thought of "flesh to eat." Again

Christ maintained and more than maintained His position by elaborating the thoughts, and telling them once again of Himself, His life and work, and the assurance of the eternal consequences to those who were united to Him. (d) This was too much for many of His nominal disciples and the outcome was *defection* (vi. 60-66), for they could not possibly continue with One who had been saying such difficult, mysterious and impossible things. (e) It was then that our Lord turned to the twelve and sought the proof of their *devotion* (vi. 67-71), and was assured by Peter, speaking for them all, that notwithstanding everything, they were convinced that He had the words of eternal life, as the Holy One of God, and on this account they would not and could not go away.

In the light of this developing conversation it is not difficult to understand the true meaning of the chapter. It is sometimes wondered why there is no institution of the Lord's Supper in this Gospel, and the true answer is pretty certainly that the purpose of the Evangelist "was to interpret a Person rather than to record that Person's deeds" (Holdsworth, "The Life Indeed," p. 80). As Westcott and other great commentators have pointed out, this chapter does not refer to the Lord's Supper but to the Cross, or rather perhaps, as the Bishop of Durham in his booklet has so well said, both this chapter and the Lord's Supper refer in different ways to the Atoning Sacrifice of Christ.

At this point we must stop for a while, and it is essential to master the details of the various incidents, watching at each point the growth of faith and unbelief. From the very beginning, section by section, different men and women are taken as types of faith, while side by side there is the ever-deepening dissatisfaction and hostility of "the Jews." The seven points stated in the purpose (xx. 31) are also all illustrated and developed in the sections now before us.

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(To be continued.)

