

Studies in the Gospel of St. John.

III.

THE GREAT CONFLICT (Ch. vii.-xii.).

AS we proceed we cannot help noticing the remarkable development in our Lord's relations with those around Him. We have already considered something of His revelation of Himself and the commencement of faith and unbelief which was the twofold result. Now we shall observe the development of the opposition which deepened into conflict and culminated in His seizure and death.

I. THE COMMENCEMENT OF THE CONFLICT (ch. vii. and viii.).

These two chapters are concerned with events associated with the Feast of Tabernacles. It is significant and appropriate that Christ's conflict with the Jews should be at the capital, Jerusalem, and at one of the Feasts when so many people were present. A careful study of the section reveals the following main points.

1. *Before the Feast* (ch. vii. 1-13). We observe here the relation of our Lord to His brethren. They wanted Him to give public proofs of His claims, but that was not His way, and He reserves to Himself perfect liberty.

2. *During the Feast* (ch. vii. 14-39). Here we see the relation of our Lord to the Jews, and almost every verse reveals different attitudes of the people and their leaders to Him (vii. 7, 15, 20, 25, 30, 32, 35, 40, 41). Meanwhile He claimed to be the Water of Life (vii. 37-39) as He had already claimed to be the Bread of Life (vi. 48).

3. *After the Feast* (ch. vii. 40-viii. 59). It is profoundly interesting to notice the effect of the company of officers who were sent by the leaders to apprehend Christ. They came under the wonderful spell of His truly fascinating personality and teaching, and returned without Him (vii. 32, 45, 46). We also see the apparently nervous fear of Nicodemus, who desired to be faithful and yet had not sufficient courage to carry the matter through to the end (vii. 50-52). At this time there was a new claim made by Christ, to be the Light of the world (viii. 12). It is more than probable that the symbol was suggested by the lamps which formed a special feature of the Feast of Tabernacles. As the Light of man's life we can see how He con-

victed of sin (viii. 1-11), guided human existence (viii. 12), and reproved unreality (viii. 13-59).

II. THE COURSE OF THE CONFLICT (ch. ix. and x.).

It is probable that this section is to be associated with the Feast of Dedication (x. 22) which fell in the month of December, about two or three months after the Feast of Tabernacles. But in any case there is a close connection and a real unity throughout.

1. *The Sign and its consequences* (ch. ix.). This is an illustration of our Lord as the Light of the world (viii. 12 and ix. 5). He was a light for the blind eyes of the body, and also for spiritual blindness (ix. 35-39). To the man and to Christ Himself the consequences of this action were profound and far-reaching.

2. *The Shepherd and His claim* (ch. ix. 1-21). There is a close connection between this and the preceding chapter, and in x. 21 there is a distinct reference to the healing of the blind man. The allegory is really a continuation of the discourse which our Lord began (in ix. 39-41). It was necessary to rebuke the Pharisees for their treatment of the man, and at the same time to encourage the man in his new-born faith. The Pharisees claimed by their excommunication of the man to hold the keys of the kingdom, but in that action they had clearly forfeited the right to be regarded as true spiritual leaders because their sentence on the man did not express the judgment of God. And then in this section our Lord contrasts them as false guides with Himself as the true Guide. Here we see the last symbol used by Christ to describe Himself, and there are three figures, or perhaps three scenes, showing Him as the Leader (1-6), the Door (7-10), and the Shepherd (11-18). The thought of the Shepherd runs through the whole, and is expressive at once of His superior power and His considerate love.

3. *The Son and His consciousness* (ch. x. 22-42). Matters were rapidly approaching a climax, and it is interesting to observe the way in which our Lord's words, action and attitude led to division concerning Him (x. 19). They demand a proof that He was indeed the Messiah, and when He replied, telling them plainly that they were not of His sheep, they proceeded to stone Him. To this Christ made the rejoinder, asking which of the good works was the one for which they were stoning Him, and with another claim to be uniquely related to God He went away, escaping out of their hands.

III. THE CULMINATION OF THE CONFLICT (ch. xi. and xii.).

At this point it must be again noticed that a break is made in the narrative and the writer resumes the method of writing which marked the first four chapters. As we have already seen, from chapter v. to chapter x. inclusive the record is given from the standpoint of Christ Himself, while before the fifth chapter and after the tenth the story is told in the third person; about Christ, instead of Christ speaking for Himself. "Now John begins to speak about Christ once more," and we shall see "what a human estimate would term the sad ending of His life" (H. W. Clark, *The Christ From Without and Within*, pp. 183, 184). Once more we see clear marks of unity in this section, and also the signs of the development of hostility culminating in the determination to put Christ to death.

1. *The great miracle* (xi. 1-46). Here we have the last of the "signs" recorded in connection with our Lord's public ministry, and, as with the first one (ii. 11), so with this, it was worked for the glory of God (xi. 4, 40). As it has been helpfully pointed out, the miracle shows Christ as the Master of death, even though He was Himself about to die.

2. *The differing results* (ch. xi. 47-xii. 19). The restoration of Lazarus was the immediate occasion for the decisive judgment of the Jewish leaders against Christ (xi. 53), and it is noteworthy that in this section we have in turn, (1) the attitude of the leaders, (2) the attitude of the disciples, and (3) the attitude of the people.

3. *The closing scene* (ch. xii. 20-36). With the visit of the Greeks, followed by the last expression of hostility on the part of the people, our Lord's public ministry closed, and as His time had not yet come, He left them with a warning (xii. 36).

Then the record of the public ministry is closed with a twofold epilogue. Nothing more was needed, for our Lord was already firmly fixed in the hearts of His disciples (xii. 1-9); was a subject of great interest on the part of popular opinion (xii. 12-19), and was also the object of attention from a far wider circle represented by the Greeks (xii. 20-28). This epilogue is deserving of very close attention as a summary of the whole of the public ministry.

(1) *The Judgment of the Evangelist* (ch. xii. 37-43). In solemn words it is pointed out that Isaiah's explanation was true, that the manifestations had been sufficient, and that the people would not

accept Christ because they were afraid of the leaders, because they thought more of human commendation than Divine praise.

(2) *The Judgment of the Master* (ch. xii. 44-50). In these words we have Christ's own conclusion with reference to His ministry among the Jews. There were two sides, light and darkness, and if only He had been accepted as the light there would have been salvation not judgment. As it was, darkness necessitated the solemn result of judgment on sin. This contrast between light and darkness is particularly interesting as seen in the continuance of the teaching in the First Epistle of St. John.

Again we must observe how all through this section the purpose of xx. 31 is developed in detail. Although chief attention is naturally given to unbelief and opposition, the work of faith was going on and disciples were being impressed and influenced towards that culmination of faith which we shall see later on (x. 42).

IV. SUMMARY OF THE PUBLIC MINISTRY.

We must pause here to review the entire section from i. 19-xii. 50 with special reference to some of the outstanding features.

1. *The phases of the glory of Christ.* (a) Consider His various titles as seen from the very beginning and in almost every chapter, but especially in chapter i. (b) Consider His five presentations of Himself to the Jews as seen in this section; ii. 12-iv. 54; v. 1-vi. 71; vii. 1-x. 21; x. 22-xii. 11; xii. 12-50. (c) Consider His consciousness and claims, especially as seen in chapters v.-xii. The Divine title "I am" will naturally be observed in various forms, but particularly in viii. 58. Three great revelations of Himself call for special notice (v. 17, 18; viii. 58; x. 30).

2. *The phases of the life of faith.* (a) Consider Christ's presentation of Himself as the object of faith. In almost every chapter He is seen in relation to human life and needs. From the very beginning in chapter i. He offers Himself for trust, and in every place He is seen in one form or another as the Saviour, Lord and Friend of man. From His earliest manifestations to the disciples (ch. i.) and His public appearance in Jerusalem (ch. ii., iii.), Samaria (ch. iv.) and Galilee (ch. iv.), He is seen as the Source of life (ch. v.), the Sustenance of life (ch. vi.), the Satisfaction of life (ch. vii.), the Guide of life (ch. viii.), the Lord of life (ch. ix.-xi.). It has also been suggested that in chapters i.-vi. He is revealed as Life; in chapters vii.-ix.

as Light, and in chapters x.--xii. as Love. (b) Consider the attitude of faith in those who responded, and how it was elicited. In every chapter there are illustrations of this wonderful truth. Whether it was on the part of disciples or Nicodemus or the woman or the nobleman or those of the Jews who were ready to accept Him, trust is the one element in which life finds its perfect realization. To quote again some words of a recent writer: "It is this effect 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" (Holdsworth, *The Life Indeed*, p. 57).

It is also interesting to notice that our Lord is recognized in this Gospel first by pious Israelites (ch. i.), then by Samaritans, a mixed people (iv. 39), and then by Gentiles from afar (xii. 20), the three together representing the whole world. And thus while in Nicodemus, the woman of Samaria and the Roman nobleman we may think of the way in which God's grace to the world is illustrated, we also see in them the proof of the world's response of true homage to the Lord Jesus Christ.

3. *The phases of the working of unbelief.* (a) Consider the character of the hostility. As we notice this ever-deepening from point to point we see something of its persistence and bitterness. If it were not so true to human nature we should be inclined to wonder whether man could maintain and increase such an attitude of enmity to a Being like Christ. (b) Consider the grounds of the rejection of Christ. Why were they so hostile? The answer is that they fully recognized the claim that He made, and as they were not prepared to acknowledge it, there was nothing else to be done but to refuse it and reject Him. This shows that the hostility went far deeper than any mere act of doing beneficent works on the Sabbath day. It was due to the stupendous claim involved in these "signs," the claim to be nothing less than Divine.

And so we notice the record of division in the record of Christ (vii. 43; x. 19). Thus it is always, for men cannot be neutral; they have to take sides either for Him or against Him.

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(To be continued.)