Gospel of John-F.B.Meyer-7

GOSPEL OF JOHN
THE LIFE AND LIGHT OF MEN
LOVE TO THE UTTERMOST

F. B. Meyer

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1 THE SEVEN SAYINGS OF THE CROSS

"Then delivered he Him therefore unto them to be crucified. And they took Jesus, and led Him away."--John 19:16.

DRIVEN from one position after another by the Jewish notables and rabble, Pilate at last, much against his will, gave directions for the Lord's crucifixion. The purple robe flung over his shoulders was replaced by his own simple clothes, though the crown of thorns was not improbably left upon his head.

Two others were led out to suffer with Him--highwaymen lately captured in some red-handed deed. Barabbas, their chief, for whom the central cross had been designed, had escaped it by a miracle; but they were to suffer the just reward of their deeds. A detachment of soldiers was told off under a centurion, to see to the execution of the sentence, and the heavy crosses were placed upon the shoulders of the sufferers, that they might bear them to the place of execution.

It was probably about 10 a.m. when the sad procession started on its way. Two incidents took place as it passed through the crowded streets, which surely had never witnessed such a spectacle: no, not even in the days when David traversed them in flight from Absalom.

The beams laid on our Lord proved too heavy in the steeper ascents for his exhausted strength, and his slow advance so delayed the procession that the guard became impatient. Here comes a foreigner! A Jew of Cyrene I Harmless and inoffensive, gladly would he make way for the crowd. Why should he not bear this burden under which Jesus of Nazareth is falling to the ground? The insolent soldiers, with oath and jest, constrain him, and he dares not resist. Probably Simon had no previous knowledge of Him for whom he bore this load, and loathed the service he was compelled to render; but that compulsory companionship with Jesus carried him to Calvary. He beheld the wondrous tragedy, heard the words which we are to recite; from that day became, with his family, a humble follower of Jesus. We at least infer this from Mark's emphatic mention of the fact that he was father of Alexander and Rufus; whilst the Apostle Paul, in the Epistle to the Romans, tenderly refers to Rufus and his mother. This is not the only instance in the history of Christianity when the compulsion of an apparent accident has led a man to Christ. Many a time has compulsory cross-carrying led men to the Crucified.

Of the vast multitude who followed Jesus, a large contingent consisted of women. From the men, in that moving crowd, He does not appear to have received one word of sympathy. Timidity, or questioning with their own hearts, or inveterate hatred, closed their lips. But the women expressed their sorrow with all the outcry of Oriental grief, rending the air with piercing cries. "Weep not for Me," the Saviour said, ever more thoughtful for others than Himself; "but for yourselves and your children." And He who had been mocked because of his claim to be a King, and who would shortly from the cross begin to minister as a Priest, then as Prophet foretold the approaching fate of that fair city, asking significantly, since the Romans dealt thus with Himself an innocent sufferer, what would they not do when exasperated by the pertinacious resistance of the Jewish people in the protracted siege.

Just outside the city gates, by the side of the main road, was a little conical eminence which, from its likeness to the shape of a skull, was called in the Aramaic Golgotha, in the Greek Cranion, in the Latin Calvary. As we speak of the brow of a hill, they called the bald eminence a skull. There the procession stayed, and what transpired may be best followed as we touch on the seven sentences our Lord uttered on the cross, collated and set in order from the four Gospels.

I. "FATHER, FORGIVE THEM; FOR THEY KNOW NOT WHAT THEY DO."

Arrived at the place of execution, Jesus would be stripped once more, a linen cloth at most being left about his loins. He would then be laid upon the cross, as it rested on the ground, his arms stretched along the cross-beams, his body resting on a projecting piece of rough wood, misnamed a seat. Huge nails would then be driven through the tender palm of each hand, and the shrinking centre of each foot. The cross would then be lifted up and planted in a hole previously dug to receive it, with a rude shock causing indescribable anguish. "So they crucified Him, and two others with Him, on either side one, and Jesus in the midst."

Pilate had written a title to be nailed to the head-piece of the cross, according to the usual custom, with the name and designation of the crucified, "This is Jesus, the King of the Jews." It was written in Greek, the language of science; Latin, the language of government; and Hebrew, the language of religion. It is this fact that accounts for the differences in the Gospels. One evangelist translates from one language, another from another. The inscription was meant to insult the Jews. It was equivalent to saying, "This nation cannot produce a better monarch than this; and this is the fate which will be meted out to all such pretenders." The authorities were indignant, and did their utmost to induce Pilate to alter it. But in vain. He would be master this time, and dismissed them with the curt reply, "What I have written I have written." Each man is writing his conception of the nature and claims of Christ by the way in which he treats Him, either acknowledging his divine glory as he enthrones Him, or repudiating his claims as he tramples Him under foot, and turns away to his sin.

The criminal's clothes fell as a perquisite to the soldiers specially charged with the execution of the sentence. With our Lord's outer clothes they had no difficulty; they were too poor to be worth keeping entire, so they tore them up into equal pieces. But the inner tunic was of unusual texture; perhaps it had been woven for Him by his mother's hands, or by one of the women who so carefully ministered to Him. In any case it was too good to tear. The dice were ready in the pocket, one of the helmets would serve as dice-box; and so "they parted his raiment among them, and for his vesture they did cast lots. These things therefore the soldiers did."

It was probably during this by play that our Lord uttered the first cry of the cross, and entered on that work of intercession, which He ever lives to perpetuate and crown. He thinks, not of Himself, but of others; is occupied, not with his own pains, but with their sins. Not a threat, nor a menace; but the purest, tenderest accents of pleading intercession.

When was that prayer answered? Seven weeks after this, on the day of Pentecost, three thousand of these people, whom Peter described as the murderers of Christ, repented and believed; and in the days that followed thousands more, and a great company of the priests. That was the answer to this intercession. When we see our brethren sinning a sin not unto death, without realizing its full significance and enormity, if we ask God, as Jesus did, He will give us life for those that sin not unto death. There is a sin unto death, and concerning that we are not encouraged to pray. "I obtained mercy," said the great Apostle, "because I did it ignorantly in unbelief. "

II. "WOMAN, BEHOLD THY SON; SON, BEHOLD THY MOTHER."

The second saying was about his mother. His cross was the centre of bitter mockery. The chief priests, and scribes, and elders challenged Him to descend from the cross, pledging themselves to believe if He did. The crowd caught their spirit with contemptible servility, and repeated their words, "Son of God, come down from the cross, that we may believe." A passer-by called out derisively, "Where is now the boast that He could raise the temple in three days? Let Him do it if He can." The soldiers even caught up the abuse, and vented their coarse jokes on One whose innocence and gentleness appeared to exasperate them. And the malefactors who were hanged cast the same in his teeth.

Were there no sympathisers in all that crowd to exchange glances of love and faith? Yes, there was one little group. When Peter left the hall of Caiaphas, John probably lingered there still, followed to the bar of Pilate, waited long enough to know how the matter would fall, and then hastened to the humble lodgings where Mary and a few other women, in awful suspense, were awaiting tidings. As soon as the mother knew all, she resolved to see her beloved Son once more. "It is no place for women," John would say. But she answered, "I must see Him yet again." Then said John, "If you will indeed go, I will take you." "I too will go," sadly said Mary, her sister, the wife of Cleophas; "and I also," said Mary of Magdala. What a sight for those loving hearts, when they saw the crosses in the distance, and knew that on one of them was hanging the dearest to them of all on earth! But the love that makes the timid deer turn to fight valiantly for its young made them oblivious to everything except to get near Him. How little had the young mother realised that Simeon meant this, when he told her that a sword would one day pierce her soul!

Jesus knew how much she was suffering, and how lonely she would be when He was gone. He had neither silver nor gold to leave, but would at least provide a home and tender care as long as she required them. Elevated but very little above the ground, He could easily speak to the little group. "Woman," He said, not calling her "mother," lest identification with Himself might expose her to insult, "behold thy Son." Then, looking tenderly toward John, He consigned her to his care.

Did He give a further look, which John interpreted to mean that he should lead her away? It may have been so, for from that hour

he took her to his home; and so she passes from the page of Scripture, except for the one glimpse we have of her, in the upper room, awaiting the baptism of the Holy Spirit.

III. "TO-DAY SHALT THOU BE WITH ME IN PARADISE."

We cannot explore all the causes which brought about so great a change in this man, and produced so lofty an ideal of his Fellow-sufferer. We have to deal rather with the response of Jesus. Lost by the first Adam, Paradise was being regained by the last; and it is now not far away. A dying man may see the sun leave the zenith, but ere it set in the western wave he may be in the land of Paradise. Absent from the body, present with the Lord. There is no state of unconsciousness between the two. We close our eyes on the dimming spectacles of this world at one moment, to behold the King in his beauty the next.

Men may strip Jesus of everything, but they cannot touch his power to save. In the moment of his greatest weakness He was able to rescue a man from the very brink of perdition, and take him as a trophy of his power to heaven. What will He not be able to do now that the mortal weakness is passed, and that He is exalted to be a Prince and a Saviour!

IV. "MY GOD, MY GOD, WHY HAST THOU FORSAKEN ME?"

It would be between eleven o'clock and noon that these incidents took place; but from noon till three in the afternoon a pall of darkness hung over the cross and city. We know not how it came, but it appears to have silenced all the uproar which had surged around the cross, and to have filled the minds of all with awe. Men might have gazed rudely on his dying agony; Nature refused to behold it. Men had stripped Him, but an unseen hand drew drapery about Him. For three hours it lasted, and was a befitting emblem of the darkness that enveloped his soul when He who knew no sin was made to be sin for us, "that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him."

Do you wonder that He felt thus, and question how such a forsaking had been possible at such an hour? There is but one explanation. This was not a normal human experience. Only once in the history of the race has all iniquity been laid on one head; only once has the curse of the sin of the world been borne by one heart; only once has it been possible, in drinking the cup of death, to taste death for every man. "He who knew no sin was made sin for us. He was wounded for our transgressions, bruised for our iniquities." On no other hypothesis than that Jesus was the Lamb of God, bearing away the sin of the world, can you account for the darkness of that midday midnight which obscured his soul. I cannot tell what transpired; I have no philosophy of the Atonement to offer; I only believe that the whole nature of God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto Himself; and that, in virtue of what was done there, we may apply for forgiveness to the faithfulness and justice of God.

V. "I THIRST."

During the hours of spiritual anguish, our Lord was largely oblivious to his physical needs; now, as the long hours passed, these latter began to assert themselves. Inflammation, spreading from hands and feet, had resulted in a fever of thirst. He had refused the medicated drink offered at the beginning of his sufferings, because He had no desire to avoid one throb of anguish which lay in his path; but there was no reason why He should not drink of the sour wine which stood hard by the cross, now that He had drunk the cup which God had placed to his lips.

As He looked through the long line of predictions that bore on his passion, He could see that they had all been fulfilled save one; and, that this Scripture might be fulfilled, He said, "I thirst." Some, who stood near the cross, and, in the growing light, began to regain their confidence, tried to make ridicule of this plaintive ejaculation; but one who noticed his pale and parched lips was touched with pity, and took a stalk of hyssop, which was just long enough to reach the mouth of the Sufferer, and elevating a sponge dipped in vinegar, fulfilled thus unwittingly the ancient prediction, "They gave Me also gall for my meat, and in my thirst they gave Me vinegar to drink."

VI. "IT IS FINISHED."

As we compare the Gospels, we find that these words were spoken with a loud voice. It was, in fact, the shout of a conqueror. Finished, the long list of prophecies, which closed, like gates, behind Him. Finished, the types and shadows of the Jewish ritual. Finished, the work which the Father had given Him to do. Finished, the matchless beauty of a perfect life. Finished, the work of man's redemption. Through the Eternal Spirit, He had offered Himself without spot to God; and by that one sacrifice for sin, once for all and for ever, He had perfected them that are being sanctified. He had done all that was required to reconcile the world unto God, and to make an end of sin.

Finished! Let the words roll in volumes of melody through all the spheres! There is nothing now left for man to do but enter on the results of Christ's finished work. As the Creator finished on the evening of the sixth day all the work which He had made, so did the Redeemer cease on the sixth day from the work of Atonement; and, lo I it was very good.

VII. "FATHER, INTO THY HANDS I COMMEND MY SPIRIT."

The words were quoted from the Book of Psalms, which He so deafly loved. He only prefixed the name of Father; for the cloud which had extorted the cry, My God, my God, had broken, and under a blue heaven of conscious fellowship He exchanged it for Father.

If the words, "It is finished," be taken as our Lord's farewell to the world He was leaving, these words are surely his greeting to that on whose confines He was standing. It seems as though the spirit of Christ were poising itself before it departed to the Father, and saw before it no dismal abyss, no gulf of darkness, no footless chaos, but hands, even the hands of the Father--and to these He committed Himself.

The first martyr, who died after Christ, passed away with words of the same import upon his lips, with a significant alteration, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." We may use them as they have been used by countless thousands in all ages; and we know Him whom we have believed, and are persuaded that He is able to keep that which we have committed unto Him.

And when Jesus had said these words, He bowed his head upon his breast, and breathed out his spirit. No one took his life from Him: He laid it down of Himself: He had power to lay it down.

So ended that marvellous scene. The expectation of all the ages was more than realised. If it be true that on that day a tidal wave of immense volume swept around the world, and rose high up in all rivers and estuaries, this may be taken as an emblem of the much more abounding grace, which on that day rose high above the mighty obstacles of human sin, and is destined to lift the entire universe nearer God. For by it God will reconcile all things to Himself, whether in heaven or on earth.

Three items remain to be noticed.

At the moment that Jesus died there was a great earthquake, which made the earth tremble and the rocks rend; so that the ancient graves were opened, preparatory to the rising of the bodies of the saints on the Resurrection morning, following the Lord from the power of Death. And when the centurion, and they that were with him, watching Jesus, charged to see the sentence executed, saw the earthquake and the things that were done, they feared exceedingly, saying, "Truly this was the Son of God."

The veil of the Temple, also, was rent in twain from the top to the bottom, at the moment that the Great High Priest Jesus was entering the Temple not made with hands, with the blood of his propitiation. Is it to be wondered at that afterwards many priests, who had been in close contiguity to that marvellous type, became obedient to the faith?

Finally, from the pierced side of Christ came out blood and water, as John solemnly attests. "He knoweth that he saith true." This was a symptom that there had been heart-rupture, and that the Lord had literally died of a broken heart. But it was also a symbol of "the double cure" which Jesus has effected. Blood to atone; water to cleanse. "This is He that came by water and blood, not with the water only."

2 CHRIST'S BURIAL

"Then took they the body of Jesus, and wound it in linen clothes with the spices, as the manner of the Jews is to bury."--John 19:40.

"AGAINST the day of my burying hath she kept this!" so had Jesus spoken when Mary anointed his feet with the very precious spikenard. I do not suppose that any in the room save herself and her Lord understood his reference; not one of them believed that He would really die, and his body be carried to the tomb; but Mary knew better. She had sat at his feet, and drunk in his very spirit. In the glow of the evening twilight, when Martha was busy in the house, and Lazarus was away in the field, they two had sat together, and Jesus, in words similar to those He had so often used to his apostles, had told her of what was coming upon Him. Mary believed it all. She knew that she would not be present at that scene. She did not think that any would be able to perform the last loving rites for that beloved form. She feared that it might be utterly dishonoured; but she did what she could, she came beforehand to anoint the Lord's body for his burying.

It was a beautiful act of tender foresight. But in the sense of being absolutely necessary, as the only act of care and love bestowed on the Lord's dead body, it was not required; for He who at birth had prepared the body for his Son, took care that in death it should receive due honour. When Jesus expired, Luke tells us that many of His acquaintances, and the women that had followed Him from Galilee were standing afar off, beholding all that was done; John too was there, and others who had loved Him and were the grateful monuments of his healing power: they must have wondered greatly what would be done with that loved form. Yet what could they do?--they were poor and unimportant; they had no influence with the capricious and terrible Pilate; they seemed helpless to do more than wait with choking sobs until some possible chance should allow them to intervene.

Meanwhile God was preparing a solution of the difficulty. Amongst the crowd around the cross there stood a very wealthy man named Joseph. He was a native of the little town of Arimathea, that lay among the fruitful hills of Ephraim; but was resident in Jerusalem, where he had considerable property. Some of this lay in the close neighbourhood of the highway by which the cross of our Lord had been erected. He was also a member of the Jewish Sanhedrim, but it is expressly stated that he had not consented to the counsel or deed of them; if indeed he was summoned to that secret midnight meeting in the palace of Caiaphas, he certainly did not go; he was therefore innocent of any complicity in our Lord's condemnation and death. He was a good man and a just; and like Nathanael, and Simeon, and many more, he waited for the kingdom of God. More than this, he was a disciple of Jesus, though secretly.

Whatever our judgment may be about this action during the lifetime of our Lord, we have nothing but admiration for the way in which he acted when He died. What he had seen had more than decided him. Christ's meekness and majestic silence under all reproaches and indignities; the vailed sky and trembling earth; the cry of the Forsaken which ended in the trustful committal of the soul to the Father; the loud shriek and the sudden death--all these had convinced him and awed his soul, and lifted him far above the fear of man. He had been waiting for the kingdom, he would now identify himself with the King.

By his side there would seem to have stood an old friend of ours, Nicodemus. Our evangelist identifies him as having at the first come to Jesus by night. The very opening of the Lord's ministry in Jerusalem seems to have made a deep impression on his mind; but he was very timid. He was an old man, a very rich man, a member of the Sanhedrim, and he did not like to risk his position or prestige. It was much therefore for him to come to Jesus at all, and especially to come to Him in the spirit of deep respect and inquiry. There must have been something very engaging in him; for our Lord, who did not commit Himself to men in general, made very clear unfoldings of his great work to this inquiring Rabbi. From that night, even if not a real disciple, Nicodemus was strongly prejudiced in favour of Jesus; and on one occasion, at least, brought on himself reproach for attempting indirectly to shield Him. He had not dared, however, to go beyond his first nervous question. Then, like Joseph, he was decided by what he had seen: come what may, he will now avow the thoughts which have long been in his heart.

The two men exchanged a few hurried sentences. "What will be done with his body?"

"At least it must not suffer the fate of common malefactors. Yet how shall it be prevented?"

"Look you," says Joseph, "in my garden close at hand there is a new tomb, hewn out in the rock, wherein was man never yet laid. I had prepared it for myself; but I will gladly use it for Him, if I can but get Pilate to yield me his body. I will go at once and ask for it."

"Well," says Nicodemus, "if you can succeed in getting the body, I will see to it that there are not wanting the garments and spices of death."

Without a moment's delay, for the sun is fast sinking towards the west, Joseph hastens to Pilate, and asks that he may take away the body of Jesus; and not unlikely he quickens Pilate's response by an offer of a liberal bribe if he will but accede to his request. Pilate, who had just given orders to the soldiers to hasten the death of the crucified, marvelled that Jesus was really dead; nor was he reassured until he had asked the centurion; and when he knew it of him, he gave to Joseph the necessary leave, with which he hastened back to the cross.

The sun would be very low on the horizon, flinging its last beams upon the scene, as he reached Calvary. The crowds would for the most part have dispersed. The soldiers might be engaged in taking down the bodies of the thieves. The body of Jesus was, however, still on the cross; and not far off would be the little band of attached friends of whom we have already spoken, and who would be the sole remnants of the vast crowds who had now ebbed away to their homes. What wonder, what joy, as they see Joseph reverently and lovingly begin to take Him down; with evident authority from the governor, with manifest preparations for his careful burial; they had never before known him to be interested in their Master. And who is this that waits beneath the cross with the clean linen shroud, and the wealth of spices? Ah! that is Nicodemus; but who would have thought that he would help to perform these last offices!

Oh to be a painter, and depict that scene! The discoloured corpse stained with blood, muscles flaccid, eyes closed, head helpless; Joseph, and Nicodemus, and John, and other strong men busy. The women weeping as if their hearts must break, but ready at any moment to give the needed aid. Between them they carry the body into Joseph's garden, and to the mouth of his new sepulchre. There on some grassy bank they rest it for a moment, that it may be tenderly washed and wrapped in the white linen cloth on which powdered myrrh and aloes had been thickly strewn. A white cloth would then be wrapped about the head and face, after long farewell looks and reverent kisses. Then lifted once again, the precious burden was borne into the sepulchre, and laid in a rocky niche. There was no door; but a great stone, probably circular, prepared for the purpose, was rolled with united and strenuous efforts against the aperture, to prevent the entrance of wild beast and unkindly foe. And then as the chill twilight was flinging its shadows over the world, they reverently withdrew.

Joseph and Nicodemus had done their work and had gone to their homes, and yet there were some who lingered as if unable to leave the spot. There were Mary Magdalene, and the other Mary, sitting over against the sepulchre, gazing through their tears at the place where Jesus was laid. How keen was their mental anguish! There was bereaved love; with all purity the strongest love had grown up around Christ; and now that He was gone, it seemed as if there was nothing more to live for. The prop had been rudely taken away, and the tendrils of their hearts' affection were torn and wrenched. Then there would come a rush of hot tears, indignant passion with those who had pursued Him, with such unrelenting torture, to his bitter end. Then again, broken-hearted grief at the remembrance of his anguish, and gentle patience, and shame. And, mingling sadly with all these, were disappointed hopes. Was this the end? He who died thus could not have been the Messiah! He had taught them to believe He was! He must have been self-deceived I For this life only they had hope in Christ, and they were of all most miserable! That grave-stone hid not only the body of Christ, but the structure of the brightest, fairest hopes that had ever filled the hearts of mortals!

In spite of all, they love. This is the love of women: the object of their fond attachment may be misrepresented and abused; the life may seem to be an entire failure; they may themselves be suffering greatly from the results of the beloved one's mistakes and follies--yet will they love still! And so through the gathering gloom and evening stillness they lingered on, until the increasing darkness told them that the Sabbath had come. Then they returned and rested the Sabbath day, according to the commandment; but neither they, nor Joseph, nor Nicodemus, nor John, would be able to partake of the Paschal festivities. To take part in a burial at any time would defile them for seven days, and make everything which they touched unclean; to do so at that time involved seclusion through the whole of the Passover week, with all its holy observances and rejoicings.

As we pursue this narrative, many thoughts are suggested.

We see the minute fulfilment of prophetic Scriptures.--It has been written by Isaiah on the page of inspiration, that the Messiah would make his grave with the rich. When Jesus died that prophecy seemed most unlikely of accomplishment; but it was literally fulfilled. There is not a prophecy, however minute, concerning our Lord's life and death, which did not have an actual fulfilment; and does not this show us how we are to treat the prophecies which foretell his future glory and second advent? They too shall have a literal and exact fulfilment.

We learn, too, that there are more friends of Christ in the world than we know.--They sit in our legislatures, in our councils, in our pews; we meet them day after day; they give little or no sign of their discipleship; the most large-hearted friend would be surprised to hear that they were Christians. But they are Christ's. Christ knows and owns them. But if they are secret disciples now, they will not be secret disciples always. A time will come when the fire of their love will burn the bushel that hides it, and they will avow themselves on the Lord's side.

We gather, too, that God can always find instruments to carry out his purposes.--The immediate followers of Christ could not see how to preserve the beloved corpse from defilement, but God had his place and his servants ready; and at the very crisis of need He brought them to the point. So has it been again and again; when influence and money and men have been really required for the work of God, they have been all at once forthcoming. He says to men like Joseph, Go, and he goeth; and to men like Nicodemus, Come, and he cometh; and to his servants, Do this, and it is done. Even the king's heart is in the hand of the Lord; as the rivers of water, He turneth it wheresoever He will.

There is also a very significant meaning contained in John 19:41; "In the place where He was crucified there was a garden; and in the garden a new sepulchre." There is something startling in the association the cross, the garden. The one--the symbol of shame and suffering, the most awful witness to the destructive power of that sin which has laid waste our world; the other--where flowers, Eden's brightest relics, were guarded for man's enjoyment. Flowers, blooming in all the luxuriance of an Oriental spring, shed their fragrance around our Saviour when He died. One loves to dwell upon the thought that Golgotha was part of the garden--that earth's fairest, brightest, gentlest nurslings were there, mingling their smiles and balm with the trampling angry footsteps and the cursings of malignant foes. They had been very dear to Him in his life-course; it was only meet that they should be near Him when He died. Was it not symbolical? In a garden man fell; in a garden he was redeemed! And that death of Christ has sown our world with the flowers of peace and joy and blessedness, so that many a wilderness has begun to rejoice and to blossom as the rose.

Whilst the burial of Christ was proceeding, the chief priests and their party were holding a meeting in all haste before the Sabbath began. The success of their scheme was no doubt the theme of hearty congratulation. But they dreaded Him still; they feared that all might not be over; they could not forget that He had spoken of rising the third day; and at the least, might not the disciples steal away the body, and spread abroad the report that He had risen, and so the last error would be worse than the first? A deputation was therefore appointed to wait on Pilate representing their fears. Tired of them and the whole case, he was in no humour to please them. "Ye have a guard," said he brusquely; "go, make it as sure as you can!" This they did. They passed a strong cord across the stone, and sealed its ends, and then placed soldiers to keep due watch and ward that none should lay hands upon the body that lay within.

So Christ lay entombed; but He was not there. He was in the world of spirits. The place of disembodied spirits was called, by the Jews, Sheol. It had two divisions, Paradise and Gehenna. Christ, we know from his own words, went to the former; and from Peter we gather that He also went through the realms of Gehenna, proclaiming his victory.

The practical conclusion of the whole is, however, contained in Romans 6. Just as the body of Christ after crucifixion was buried in the grave, so our sinful, sensual, selfish selves must be done away in the grave of forgetfulness and oblivion and disuse--buried with Christ, "that like as Christ was raised from the dead, through the glory of the Father, so we also should walk in newness of life."

3 THE DAY OF RESURRECTION

"The first day of the week."--John 20:1.

IT MAY be helpful if we tabulate, in a brief and concise form, the various appearances of our Lord on the great day when He was declared to be the Son of God with power by the resurrection from the dead.

Mary of Magdala--a squalid Arab village on the south of the plain of Gennesaret still bears that name--with another Mary had remained beside the tomb, till the trumpet of the Passover Sabbath and the gathering darkness had warned them to retire. They rested the Sabbath day, according to the commandment, in the saddest, darkest grief that ever oppressed the human heart; for they had not only lost the dearest object of their affection, under the most harrowing circumstances, but their hopes that this was the Messiah seemed to have been rudely shattered. But how tenacious is human love, especially the love of women! How it will cling around the ruins of the temple, even when some rude shock of earthquake has shattered it to the ground! So, when the Sabbath was over (after sundown on Saturday), they stole out to purchase additional sweet spices, which they prepared that night in order to complete the embalming of the body, which had been left incomplete on the day of crucifixion. They would probably sleep outside the city gates, which only opened at daybreak, because they were resolved to reach the sepulchre while it was yet dark.

But before they could arrive, the sublime event had occurred which has filled the world with light and joy in all succeeding years. For behold, whilst the Roman sentries were pacing to and fro before the sepulchre, there had been a great earthquake, and the angel of the Lord had descended from heaven, rolled back the stone from the door, and sat upon it. Then from that opened door the Lord had come forth unperceived by the eye of man (for the watchers were dazed and dazzled by the appearance of the angel and the terror of the earthquake), and in sublime majesty had become the First-born from among the dead, and the First-fruits of them that sleep.

The woman, meanwhile, were hurrying to the grave, debating as they did so how they would be able to roll away the stone from its mouth. Probably they had heard nothing of the seals and sentries with which the Sanhedrim had endeavoured to guard against all eventualities; for, had they known, they would hardly have ventured to come at all, They were greatly startled, however, when, on approaching the grave, they saw that the stone was rolled away. Mary of Magdala apparently detected this first; and without staying to see further, and with the conviction that it must have been rifled of its precious contents, started off to apprise Simon Peter and the disciple whom Jesus loved. What a shock, as she broke in on their grief, with the tidings, "They have taken away the Lord out of the sepulchre, and we know not where they have laid Him."

What a series of mistakes was hers! She had gone to anoint the dead while the morning light still lingered over the hills of Moab : she did not realize that He could not be holden by the bands of death, and had passed out into the richer, fuller fife, of which death is the portal.

She came with aromatic spices that her means had bought, and her hands prepared: she did not know that all his garments were already smelling of aloes and cassia, of the perfume of heaven with which his Father had made Him glad.

She came to a Victim, so she thought, who had fallen beneath the knife of his foes as a Lamb led to slaughter: she was not aware that He was a Priest on the point of entering the most Holy Place on her behalf.

She came for the Vanquished : but failed to understand that He was a Victor over the principalities and powers of hell; and that the keys of Hades and the grave were hanging at his girdle, whilst the serpent was bruised beneath his feet.

She thought that she had come to put a final touch, such as only a woman can, to a life of sad and irremediable failure: but had no conception that on that morning a career had been inaugurated which was not only endless and indissoluble in itself, but was destined to vitalise uncounted myriads.

She thought that the empty tomb could only be accounted for by the rifling hands that had taken away the precious body: but could not guess that the Rifler of the perquisites of death was none other than the Lord Himself.

We all make mistakes like this. Our treasures, whether of things or people, which had been our pride and joy, pass from us; and we

stand beside the grave, gazing in on vacancy and emptiness; we think that we can never be happy again; we suppose that God's mercies are clean gone for ever, and that his mercies have failed for evermore. But, all the while, near at hand, the radiant vision of a transfigured blessing waits to greet us, and to fill us with an ecstasy that shall never pall upon us, but make our after-life one long summer day.

In the meanwhile, the other women had pursued their way to the grave. The guard had already fled in terror, so there was none to intercept or frighten them; and entering the sepulchre they saw a young man, emblem of the immortal youth of God's angels, sitting on the right side, clothed in a long white garment--and they were affrighted. Presently, as they were much perplexed, behold, two men stood by them in shining garments; and as they were afraid and bowed down their faces to the earth, they said unto them, "Be not affrighted: Ye seek Jesus, which was crucified. He is not here; for He is risen, as He said. Remember how He said unto you when He was yet in Galilee, that He would rise again. Come, see the place where they laid Him. And go quickly, tell his disciples, and Peter, that He goeth before you into Galilee; there shall ye see Him, as He said unto you." And they departed quickly from the sepulchre with fear and great joy; and did run to bring his disciples word.

In the meantime, Peter and John were. hurrying to the sepulchre by another route, and probably reached it just after the women had left. John, younger than Peter, had outrun him, but was withheld by reverential awe from doing more than peering into the empty grave. The linen clothes, lying orderly disposed, seem to have especially arrested his notice, yet went he not in. Peter, however, went at once into the sepulchre; he also saw the linen clothes, and especially that the cloth which had covered the face of the dead was wrapped together in a place by itself. Then John also went in; he saw and believed. It was evident to them both that the tomb had not been rifled, nor the body stolen by violent hands; for these garments and the spices would have been of more value to thieves than a naked corpse. In any case, thieves would not have been at the pains to fold the garments up so carefully; whilst the same indications proved that the body had not been removed by friends--for they would not have left the grave-clothes behind.

When the disciples had gone back to their own home, Mary stood without at the door of the sepulchre weeping; and as she wept she stooped down, and looked into the sepulchre. What earnest heart is there, that has not at some time stood there with her, looking down into the grave of ordinances, of spent emotions, of old and sacred memories, seeking everywhere for the Redeemer, who had been once the dearest reality, the one object of love and life? The two sentry-angels, who sat, the one at the head and the other at the feet, where the body of Jesus had lain, sought in vain to comfort her. "Woman," they said, in effect, "there is no need for tears; didst thou but know, couldest thou but understand, thy heart would overflow with supreme joy, and thy tears become smiles." "They have taken away my Lord," she said, "and I know not where they have laid Him." What could angel voices do for her, who longed to hear one voice only? What were the griefs of others in comparison with hers? In an especial sense Jesus was hers! my Lord! Had He not cast out from her seven devils?

Some slight movement behind---or perhaps, as Chrysostom finely supposes, because of an expression of love and awe which passed over the angel faces--led her to turn herself back, and she saw Jesus standing, but she knew not that it was Jesus. Supposing Him, in her grief and confusion, to be the gardener, she said that if He knew the where about of the body she sought, she would gladly have it removed at her expense: nay, she even volunteered to bear it off herself. Then He spoke the old familiar name with the old intonation and emphasis; and she answered in the country tongue they both knew and loved so well, "Rabboni!" In her rapture she sought to embrace Him, but this must not be; and there was need for Christ to work in her love, with his high art, as the artificer may carve the stone, or engrave some legend on the intaglio. He therefore withdrew Himself, saying, "Touch Me not." To Thomas afterwards He said, "Behold my hands and my side; reach hither thy finger": because there was no danger of his abusing the permission, or leaning unduly on the sensuous and physical. But Mary must learn to exchange the outward for the inward, the transient for the eternal, and to pass from the old fellowship with Jesus as friend and companion into a spiritual relationship which would subsist to all eternity. Therefore Jesus spoke of his ascension, and bade her look upward, and see, gleaming on high, diviner things. So she was prepared for the time when, in the upper room, she should continue steadfastly in prayer, and come nearer to Him whom she loved than ever previously.

Did you ever realize that the intonations of the voice of Jesus, which had passed unimpaired through death, suggest that in that new life, which lies on the other side of death, we shall hear the voices speak again which have been familiar to us from childhood? As is the heavenly, so are they who are heavenly; and as we have borne the image of the earthly, we shall bear that of the heavenly, and shall speak again with those whom we have lost awhile, and they with us.

Mary Magdalene went and told them that had been with Him, as they mourned and wept, that she had seen the Lord, and that He had spoken these things to her. But they, when they had heard that He was alive, and had seen of her, believed not.

In close succession, the Lord appeared to others of the little group. To the women, as they ran to bring his disciples word. To Peter, whom He encountered on his way back, in lonely astonishment and awe, and restored with gracious words of forgiveness. To the two that walked to Emmaus, in the afternoon, arid talked of all that had happened. Finally He appeared to the whole company of

the apostles, as they sat at meat. They had carefully shut their doors, since there was every reason to fear that the rumours of the events of the morning would arouse against them the strong hate and fear of the Pharisees. It may be that they were startled by every passing footfall, and every movement on the stair, as when the two returned from Emmaus to tell how Jesus had been made known unto them in the breaking of bread. Then, suddenly, without announcement or preparation, the figure of their beloved Master stood in the midst of them, with the familiar greeting of peace! And, as the sacred historian naively puts it, they were terrified and affrighted, and supposed that they were gazing on a spirit. But the Lord allayed their fears, first by showing them his hands and his feet; and next, by partaking of a piece of broiled fish and of an honeycomb.

Evidently He was clothed in the resurrection or spiritual body of which the Apostle Paul speaks. He was not subject to all the laws that govern our physical life. He could pass freely through unopened doors, and at will He could manifest Himself, speak, stand, and walk, or subject Himself to physical sense.

His words were very significant. He began by upbraiding them for their reluctance to believe that He had risen. Again He said, "Peace be unto you"; and accompanied his words with the indication of his wounds--"He showed them his hands and his side." This was the peace of forgiveness, which falls on our conscience-stricken hearts--as the dew distils on the parched heritage. "Look at the wounds of Jesus," cried Staupitz to Luther; and there is no other sign that will give rest to the penitent.

After this He opened their understandings, that they might understand the Scriptures, and showed them that a suffering Messiah was the thought which pervaded the entire Hebrew Scriptures. "Thus it is written, and thus it behoved the Messiah to suffer, and to rise from the dead the third day." What would we not give to have some transcript of that wonderful conversation! With what new eyes should we read the Bible, if only we could know what Jesus said on that occasion!

Next He repeated the "Peace be unto you," and told them that He was sending them forth as the Father had sent Him--"Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature." And He added, "Behold, I send the promise of my Father upon you; but tarry ye in the city of Jerusalem, until ye be endued with power from on high." "And these signs shall follow them that believe. In my name shall they cast out demons; they shall speak with new tongues; they shall take up serpents; and if they drink any deadly thing, it shall not hurt them; they shall lay hands on the sick, and they shall recover."

Then, to fit them for this time of waiting, and that the Holy Spirit might prepare them to receive his fuller inflow, the Lord breathed on them and said, "Receive ye the Holy Ghost; Whose soever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; whose soever sins ye retain, they are retained." By which He surely meant that there was no other way by which sins would be forgiven and put away than by the preaching of the Gospel, which He now committed to their trust. They are therefore parallel with Peter's statement in after days, "Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, by which we must be saved." The Church of God alone can proclaim to men the conditions of evangelical repentance--and those who refuse her testimony, and disbelieve her Gospel, expose themselves to unspeakable condemnation and loss. "There remaineth no other sacrifice for sin; but a certain looking for of judgment, and fiery indignation." Refuse Christ, and there is no alternative way of salvation.

Whatever else is contained in these words, it is quite clear that there was nothing exclusively reserved to the apostles and their successors, which is not equally the possession of all who believe; for we know that the Lord's words were spoken not to the apostles only, but to the two that had come from Emmaus with burning hearts, and to those who were in the habit of commingling with the immediate followers of Christ. "Them that were with them" (Luke 24:33, 35, 36). All had been witnesses of these things, and all were now to proclaim in his name repentance and remission of sins among all nations, beginning at Jerusalem.

Thomas was not there on that memorable occasion. He was always accustomed to look on the dark side of things. When Jesus proposed to go into Judea to raise Lazarus, he made sure that there was no alternative but to die with Him; and when the Master spoke of his impending absence, he said gloomily, "Lord, we know not whither Thou goest, and how can we know the way?" He was doubtless at this time wandering alone over the scenes of that awful tragedy, which had so deeply imprinted itself on his imagination that he could not forget the print of the nails, and the wound in his side, and the unlikelihood of any surviving such treatment as He had received.

When he heard the story of the others, he seemed inclined to treat them as too credulous; and with the air of superior caution said, that he must not only see the wounds which death had made, but touch them with his fingers and hand. Yet we may be grateful for this story. First, because it wears the aspect of truth. What weaver of an imaginary history would ever have dared to suggest that the resurrection was impugned by some of Christ's close followers? And, next, because it shows us that the resurrection was subjected to the severest tests, just those which we would ourselves apply.

Thomas was left for a whole week. Day after day he heard the repeated story of Christ's appearances; and waited for Him to come again; and became more and more confirmed in his sad presentiment that the whole story was a myth. How great must have been his anguish during those days, as he tossed between hope and fear, saw on other faces the light which he might not share, and

thought that the Master, if really living, was neglectful of his friend!

At last Jesus came, not to anathematise or exclude him, not to break the bruised reed or quench the smoking flax, but to restore him, and to lift on him the light of his countenance.

He suited Himself to his needs. He stooped to comply with the conditions that his poor faith had laid down. He was willing to give proofs, over and above those which were absolutely necessary, to win faith. So eager was He to win one poor soul to Himself and blessedness, that He said unto 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."

I do not suppose that Thomas availed himself of the invitation. It was sufficient to see. Such an act of cold scrutiny would hardly have been compatible with his joyous shout, "My Lord and my God!" Christ's voice and form, omniscience and humility, in taking such trouble to win one to Himself--these were sufficient to convince him, and dispel all doubt.

Ah, Thomas, in that glad outburst of thine, thou reachedst a higher level than all the rest; and thou art not the last man who has seemed a hopeless and helpless wreck, unable to exercise the faith that seemed so natural to others, but who, after a time, under the teaching of Jesus, has been enabled to assume a position to which none of his associates could aspire!

Because he saw, he believed. Too many wait for signs and manifestations, for sensible emotion and conviction: but there is a more excellent way--when we do not see, and yet believe. When there is no star on the bosom of night, no chart on the unknown sea, no lover or friend or interpreter of the ways of God; and when, in spite of all, the soul knows Him whom it has believed, and clings to Him though unseen, and reckons that neither life, nor death, nor principalities, nor powers, can shut out the love of God in Christ. "Blessed are they who have not seen, and yet have believed."

4 THE LAKE OF GALILEE

"Jesus showed Himself again to the disciples at the Sea of Tiberias." John 21:1.

ALL YE shall be offended because of Me this night; for it is written, I will smite the Shepherd, and the sheep shall be scattered. But after I am risen again, I will go before you into Galilee." So had the Chief Shepherd spoken to his sad and anxious followers on the night of his betrayal. They little understood his meaning, and would perhaps have even forgotten the appointment of the rendezvous, unless it had been recalled again and yet again to their minds. But they were not allowed to forget. On the resurrection morn, the angel said to the first visitants at the empty grave: "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." And as they went to execute this bidding, Jesus Himself met them and said: "Be not afraid; go tell my brethren, that they go into Galilee; there shall they see Me." The customs of the Passover Feast forbade their instant compliance with this command, and the Master sanctioned their delay by appearing to them twice whilst they yet lingered in the metropolis. But as soon as it was possible they hastened back to the familiar scenes of their early life and of the Master's ministry.

We cannot fathom all the reasons that led our Lord to make such special arrangements for meeting with them in Galilee; but it was natural that He should wish to associate his risen life with scenes in which He had spent so large a part of his earthly ministry; and there the greatest proportion of his followers were gathered, and He would have the quietest and securest opportunity of meeting with the five hundred brethren at once. The disciples little thought that this was a farewell visit to their homes, and that within a few weeks they must return to Jerusalem, to stay there for a time, and then to wander forth to all lands, from the ancient Indus on the east to the far-famed shores of Tarshish on the west.

I. IT WAS IN THE EARLY PART OF MAY WHEN THEY RETURNED TO GALILEE.

They were in evident bewilderment as to their next step. What should they do? Should they continue to lead the artificial life which they had taken up during the Master's ministry? That seemed impossible and needless. Should they do nothing but wait? That appeared unwise when life was yet strong in them, and their means of livelihood were scant. It was of course possible to go back to fishing-smacks and fishing-tackle; but should they? And they hesitated.

But one evening came; the fragrance of thyme and rosemary and of a hundred flowers filled the air; the lake lay dimpled in the fight of the setting sun; the purple hills that stood sentinel around seemed by their very peacefulness to promise that no storm should imperil the lives of those that ventured on the blue depths. There stood the boats, yonder lay the nets, in those waters were the finny tribes; the old instinct of the fisherman arose in their hearts, and found expression on the lips of the one from whom we should have expected it. "Peter said unto them, I go a-fishing." I see no harm in it. The Master never forbade it. He cannot mean us to loiter our time away. We cannot be preachers without Him. I shall go back to the life from which He called me three years ago, and if it pleases Him to come again, He can find us now, as He found us once, among the fishing-tackle.

The proposal met with an instant assent: "We also go with thee." And in a few moments Peter with six others had leapt into a boat, and they were preparing for the night's work with all the enthusiasm with which men throw themselves into a craft which for some time they have disused. But their ardour was soon checked. Hour after hour passed. The lights went out in the hamlets and towns. The chill night damps enwrapped them. The grey morning at last began to break, whilst again and again the nets were hauled up and let down, but in vain; not a single fish had entered them. "That night they caught nothing." Why this non-success? The night was the most favourable time! These men knew the lake well, and were experienced in their craft. They did their best, but they caught nothing! Why was this? Was it a chance? No, it was a providence; it was carefully arranged, disappointing and vexing though it was, by One who was too wise to err, too good to be unkind, and who was preparing to teach them a lesson which should enrich them and the whole Church for ever.

The failure put an arrest on their temporal pursuits. Had they been successful that night, it would have been very much harder for them to renounce the craft for ever; but their non-success made them more willing to give it up, and to turn their thoughts to the evangelisation of the world. Then, too, our Lord surely meant to teach them that whilst they were doing his work, whether that work was waiting or active service, it was not necessary for them to be anxious about their maintenance; He Himself would see to that, though He had, for each meal, to light a fire and prepare it Himself. And, deeper than all this, there were surely great spiritual lessons to be gained respecting the conditions of success in catching men in the net of his Gospel.

It is difficult to understand how a man can call himself a Christian, and how he can face the awful possibilities of life, except he believes that all is ruled by One who loves us with a love that is infinite, and who wields all power on earth and in heaven. If, however, that be your fixed belief, you may find it often severely tested. "I have waited this livelong night; can this be Christ's will? … I have done my best in vain; can this be Christ's will? … I have laboured without a single gleam of success; can this be Christ's will?" Yes, most certainly it is. It is his love which is arranging all, in order to teach you some of the sweetest, deepest lessons that ever entered your heart. There is not a cross, a loss, a disappointment, a case of failure in your life, which is not arranged and controlled by the loving Saviour, and intended to teach some lesson which else could never be acquired. Fitfully, curiously, without apparent art or fixed design, is the web of our lives woven; thread seems thrown with thread at random, no orderly pattern immediately appears; but yet of all that web there is not a single thread whose place and colour are not arranged with consummate skill and love.

But what good can failure do? It may shut up a path which you were pursuing too eagerly. It may put you out of heart with things seen and temporal, and give you an appetite for things unseen and eternal. It may teach you your own helplessness, and turn you to trust more implicitly in the provision of Christ. It is clear that Christians have often to toil all night in vain, that Christ may have a background black and sombre enough to set forth all the glories of his interposition.

II. In the morning Jesus stood on the shore, but the disciples knew not that it was Jesus.

It was customary for fish-dealers to go down to greet fishers on their return from the night's toil, in order to buy up fish. Such a one now seemed waiting on the sand in the grey light, and his question was such as a fish-dealer might put: "Children, have you any food?" It therefore never occurred to the disciples to think that it was Jesus. And indeed, after the miracle was wrought, it was only the keen eye of love that knew Him to be the Lord. How often is the Lord near us, and we know Him not! He is standing there in the midst of scenes of natural beauty though his foot leaves no impression on the untrodden sand, and his form casts no shadow on the flowers or greensward. He is standing there in that dingy countinghouse, or amid the whirr of the deafening machinery, though He fills no space, and utters no word audible to human ears. He is standing there in that home, watching the sick, noting unkindness and rudeness, smiling on the little deeds done for his sake, though none ever heard the floors creak beneath his weight, or saw the doors open to admit his person. How much we miss because we fail to discern Him!

By acting thus He not only taught his disciples the reality of his presence, but He prepared them also for that new kind of life which they were henceforth to lead--a life of faith rather than of sense; a life of spiritual communion rather than of physical fellowship. He kept showing them that, though out of sight, He was still in their midst. By easy stepping-stones He joined Calvary and Olivet. By gentle progressive lessons those who had believed because they had seen were taught to walk by faith, not by sight, and to love One whom they did not see. And thus it came about that they trod no shore however desolate, went to no land however distant, dealt with no people however boorish, without carrying ever with them the thought, The Master is here!

But let me say here that if you would see Christ everywhere, you must be like John, the disciple of love. Love will trace Him every-where--as dear friends detect each other by little touches that are meaningless to others. Love's quick eye penetrates disguises impenetrable to colder scrutiny. Not for the wise, nor for the few, but for the least that love, is the vision possible that can make a desert isle like Patmos gleam with the light of Paradise itself.

III. HOW GREAT A DIFFERENCE CHRIST'S DIRECTIONS MADE!

Before He spoke they were disconsolately dragging an empty net to shore. The moment after He had spoken, and they had done

his bidding, that net was filled with a shoal of fish so heavy that it was no easy matter to drag it behind the ship.

Great lessons await us here! We, like these, have embarked in a great fishing enterprise--we are fishers of men! Our aim is to catch men alive for Christ our Lord. For this we are ready to toil, to pray, to wait. But our success depends wholly upon our Lord. He will not give it us until we can bear it, and have learnt the lesson of the night of fruitless toil. And if we are to succeed it must be in his realised companionship, and in obedience to his word.

There is a right side of the ship, and a wrong one; there is a time to plant, and a time to be still; to everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under heaven. We do not know these. If we are left to ourselves, we may cast the net on the left side of the ship at the time when we should be casting it on the right, and on the right side of the ship when we should be casting it on the left. Christ alone knows, and He will teach us exactly how and when to act with the very best results.

IV. CHRIST'S PROVISION FOR THE NEEDS OF HIS SERVANTS.

I should imagine that the disciples were somewhat anxious about their bodily needs and their supply. They did not realise that if they were doing Christ's work, Christ would look after their real needs. Christ let them meet with non-success to show how fruitless their toil was. And in the morning, when He stood on the shore, He filled their nets with fish, and called them to fire and bread and fish, to show how easily He could supply all their need. Of course this does not apply to all promiscuously, but it does apply to those who give up time, and labour, and earthly toil, for the cause of Christ. If they are really called to the work, Christ seems to say to them: "Do the best you can for Me, and do not try in addition to make up for your time and labour by night work--you had better use the night for necessary rest; the longest night spent in unbelieving labour will not profit; but I in a single moment in the morning can more than make up to you for all you have spent." Christ never lets us be in his debt. If we lend him a boat for pulpit, He weighs it down to the gunwale. If we give Him time, He makes up what we have lost. If we seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, He sees that all things' else are added. It is vain for you to rise up early and to sit up late, to eat the bread of carefulness. He giveth his beloved when they sleep.

What delicate attentions to these men! Christ knew that they were drenched with spray, chilled with the keen air, and so He prepared a fire--so thoughtful is He of the tiniest matters that will alleviate discomfort and increase our pleasure. At the same time He is frugal of the miraculous. He will deal lavishly in miracles so long as needed, but not an inch beyond. He might have created fish enough on that fire to supply them all, but that was needless so long as a hundred and fifty and three great fishes lay within easy reach; so Jesus said, "Bring of the fish which ye have now caught."

When Peter heard John say, "It is the Lord," true to his character he sprang into the sea and swam to shore, leaving the rest to drag the heavy net as best they could. Now he seems to remember his failure to bear his share in the toil; so he goes to the margin of the lake, lands the net, counts its contents, examines the meshes, to find them unbroken, and then returns with fish enough to make a breakfast for them all. It was only when all this was done that Jesus said to them, "Come and dine." Then He came forward and took the bread and fish, and gave to them. All were convinced that it was Jesus, but they were dumb with amazement and awe; they would have liked to ask questions, but they felt that they need not; their senses were convinced almost in spite of themselves. "None of the disciples durst ask Him, Who art Thou? knowing that it was the Lord."

This, says John, was the third time that Jesus had shown Himself; not literally the third time that He had shown Himself to anyone; but the third time that He had shown Himself to the disciples assembled in any considerable number. The first time was in the evening of the resurrection day; the second, when Thomas was there; the third, in the incident here recorded.

We all need our rest times, our times of learning, our times of fellowship with Jesus. Happy are we when Jesus says, "Come and dine," and leads us off to sup with Him in desert places! It may be in the loneliness of nature, or of the sick-bed, or of thwarted love; but, wherever it is, it is well if only He is there to feed us with his own dear hand.

The time will come when the .night of this sunless world shall be over, and the morning of eternity shall break upon us; it may be that in the hour of death we shall find that our work has not been so fruitless as we feared : on the quiet beach we shall see Jesus standing and know that it is He. Then one last plunge through the chill flood, and we shall partake of the preparations which his love has made, and He will say, "Come and dine."

5 PETER'S LOVE AND WORK

"Thou knowest that I love Thee … Feed my lambs."--John 21:15.

THAT miraculous catch of fish on which we have dwelt was a parable to the disciples of the kind of work in which they were thenceforward to be engaged. They were to catch men. But there was one amongst them who must have wondered much how he would fare, and what part he would take when that work was recommenced. Might he have a share in it? He would seem to have

forfeited all right. With oaths and curses he had thrice denied that he belonged to Jesus. He had given grievous occasion to the enemy to blaspheme. He had failed in a most important part of an apostle's character.

True, he had repented with bitter tears, and had received a message from the empty tomb; on that Easter morn he had heard his forgiveness spoken by the lips of his Lord, and he would not have exchanged that forgiveness for an imperial crown: but he was not quite at ease. His uneasiness betrayed itself in his plunge into the water to swim to Christ's feet, and in his rush to drag the net to the shore. He wished to be restored to the position in the Apostolate which his sin had forfeited; not because of the honour which it would bring, but because nothing less would assure him of the undiminished confidence and the entire affection of Jesus.

The Lord read his heart; and when the morning meal was done, He singled him out from the rest of his disciples, and asked him three times if he loved Him, and then thrice gave him the injunction to feed his flock. In addressing him our Lord calls him by his old name, Simon Bar Jonas, not by his new name, Peter; as if to remind him that he had been living the life of nature rather than of grace.

In considering this subject, it will be convenient to speak of the question; the answer; the command.

I. OUR LORD'S SEARCHING QUESTION

"Lovest thou Me?"

It is a very remarkable question.

We should have expected the inquiry, Dost thou believe Me? Wilt thou obey Me? Art thou prepared to carry out my plans? But lo! the risen Lord seems not anxious about aught of these, and only asks for love, and this from the rugged, manly, headstrong Peter. Yet as we hear the question asked, we realise it is the true one. He who has asked it has struck the right method of dealing with men; and if He only get the love, He will get easily enough the faith and the obedience as well, In this startling question you have unbared to you the distinctive feature which makes Christianity what it is, and which makes it different from all other religions which have flung their clouds or their rainbows over human spirits. It is the religion of love: and a man may speak with a seraph's burning tongue to defend Christianity; he may give his goods to feed the poor in obedience to the precepts of Christianity; he may even burn at the stake rather than renounce Christianity as his intellectual creed; but if he does not love, he is no Christian. If a man love not the Lord Jesus, he is anathema.

But if only there be love--love to God, love to man--then though there may be many deficiencies in head and heart, there is the one prime evidence of Christianship. It was on such grounds that the Rev. Adam Gibb of Edinburgh once acted. He had once or twice dissuaded a young woman from joining the church, deeming her ill-informed, and unable to answer elementary questions; and on his third refusal she answered, "Weel, weel, sir, I mayna, an' I dinna, ken sae muckle as mony; but when ye preach a sermon aboot my Lord and Saviour, I fin' my heart going out to Him, like linseed out of a bag." Anyone who has observed the process will know how lifelike the illustration was, and will not wonder that Mr. Gibb admitted her, and that she lived to be one of the fairest members of his church.

It is a universal question.--Its universality suggests that in Christ there is something universally lovable, and that everyone has the power of loving Him, if only the rubbish is removed which chokes the springs of affection. There are different shades in love--the love of gratitude, where the rescued spirit sings the praise of Him who took it from the terrible pit and miry clay; the love of complacency, with which the holy soul admires Him who is fairer than the sons of men, and dwells with rapture on his majestic beauty and endearing goodness; the love of friendship, in which by constant intercourse a deep attachment arises between the confiding soul and the all-sufficient Saviour. And there are as many methods of manifestation of love as there are different temperaments. With some, it is silent; with others, it speaks. With some, it sits listening at Christ's feet; with others, it hurries to and fro to serve. With some it is exuberant and enthusiastic; with others, it is still and deep. But whatever be the shade or the evidence, in each Christian heart there must be love to Christ, and the heart must be willing to give up its throne to the reign of Jesus as its Lord.

Often it carries a special emphasis.

Peter had grievously sinned. Jesus could not pass it by in utter silence. For his disciples' sake and his own, it was necessary to allude to, and to probe it. But each was performed as gently as possible. Thrice he had been warned, thrice he had denied, and now thrice shall he be asked if he really loves. And in asking him if he loved Him more than the rest, our Lord surely reminded him of his boast that if all the rest forsook Him, he never would. Christ delicately reminded him that his actions had not been consistent with his professions, at the same time giving him an opportunity of wiping out the record of failure by a new avowal of attachment. Thus He deals with us still. He does not drag our secret sins to light before our brethren and friends, and parade them before the sun; but He asks with deep meaning if we love Him, leaving conscience to apply the question. And is there not good reason for Him to ask it? How you have forgotten Him! You have been occupied with the world, pleasure, or even sin. And there is nothing that

breaks us down so quickly as this. Peter was grieved. An old man, eighty years of age, reared in connection with a church, once found his way to the penitent form, crying, "I've come here to be broke." Ah, there is nothing that so breaks us down as this!

The question must be asked as a preliminary to service.

Thrice He asked Peter, as if to be perfectly sure ere He sent him forth on a shepherd's work. All the self-denial, patience, tenderness, and delicacy of love are needed, as the Lord knew well, in dealing with men, who are naturally uninteresting, or perhaps repulsive; and hence our Lord saw the necessity that there should be love. But how could there be love to them? It was impossible to expect it; and so Christ introduced Himself, saying, in effect, "Dost thou love Me? Henceforth there will be little opportunity of doing anything for Me; thou canst not now shelter Me in thy home, or let Me use thy fishing-boats, or share my toils; but as thou forest Me, and desirest to show it, expend it on those whom I love, for whom 1 died, and whom I long to see brought into my fold. If only thou lovest, thou art fit for this."

You may not be naturally fitted to teach children, or shepherd adults; but if you love Christ, you will do better than those more cultured. It is not science, nor intellect, nor eloquence, that wins souls; but love to Christ overflowing in love to man. Love will give you a delicacy of perception, an ingenuity, a persuasiveness, which no heart shall be able to resist. Love will reconcile the accomplished scholar to a life among savages, and will carry the refined and cultured lady up to the sultry attic, or down to the damp and airless cellar. Love will bear all, believe all, hope all, endure all, if only it may win wild wandering sheep for Christ.

II. THE CONTRITE REPLY.

It was very humble.

Peter did not now boast that he excelled the rest, he did not even dare to stand sponsor for his own affection; he threw the matter back on his Lord's omniscience, and without mentioning the degree more or less, he said simply, "Thou knowest all things, Thou knowest that I love Thee." There is a delicate shade of meaning in the Greek. The words translated love are not the same. Jesus asks Peter if he cherishes towards Him love--spiritual, holy, heavenly. Peter declines to use that term, and contents himself with speaking of a simpler, more personal, more human affection. If I do not give Thee that love which is thy due as Son of God, I at least give Thee that which befits Thee as Son of Man.

There are many who could not go even as far as this. Yet here are tests of love! Would you be able to enjoy heaven if Christ were not there? Do you feel drawn out to Him in service? Do you do things which you certainly would not do except for his sake? Are you glad to hear of Him in sermon or talk, so that there is a warm feeling rising to Him at the mention of his name? Does it cost you pain to hear Him evil spoken of? Do you sorrow that you do not love Him more? Then you can challenge Him, saying, "Despite my worldliness, my faithlessness, my sins, Thou knowest all things, Thou knowest that I love Thee."

It was very confident.

"Thou knowest all things."

Jesus is omniscient. He can see with microscopic eye the lichen on the grey stone, the enamel on the shell, the modest flower; and He can see the love that is in the disciple's heart, though it be but a tiny seed.

When we sin, we are tempted to believe that we have no love to Christ. But let this incident encourage us. It is impossible for any true lover of Christ to go on in a course of sin, but quite possible for him to be betrayed into a single sin. And if that has been your case, do not shun the Master; He still believes that is possible for you to love, and He is willing even to reinstate you in his blessed service. Who is there that does not long to speak more confidently of his love to Christ? Cease, then, to think of your love to Christ, dwell much on his love to you--"He loved me, He gave Himself for me." Think of its unwearied patience, its delicacy, its tenderness. Consider the character of Christ as unfolded in the New Testament. Commune with Christ as friend with friend. Above all, put away from your heart all that might grieve Him, and throw it open to the Holy Ghost, with prayer that He would shed Christ's love abroad. Then, almost unconsciously, it will arise; though it may not become palpable till some great crisis calls you to the front, and demands some heroic sacrifice, which you will give, not feeling it great.

III. THE DIVINE COMMAND.

In the miracle Peter had been commissioned to do the work of a fisherman, that is, of an evangelist; here he is commissioned to do the work of a shepherd, that is, of a pastor. Feeding and tending lambs and sheep. It is not everyone that is able to care for the sheep; but there is hardly anyone who loves, that cannot feed or tend the lambs. And even if you shrink from the former, what good reason have you to refuse to comply with the latter?

There are in this land hundreds of young lives whom the morning light awakes to hunger, filth, and wretchedness, and whom the evening shadows limit to rooms in which you would not care to keep your dogs. They are growing up without the least sense of

decency, or the slightest reverence for God. Their existence is one long struggle against the constituted guardians of society; or if they do not resist, they are always eluding. In addition to these are the children of our homes and families and schools. "Feed my lambs!'"

It is worthy of note that two Greek words are used in these injunctions. In the first and last, the Master says simply, Feed. In the middle He adds, Do the work of a shepherd. So that the lover of Christ has not fulfilled all his duty, when he has given his sacred lesson or instruction: he must go further, and be prepared to act as shepherd.

6 THE LIFE-PLAN OF PETER AND JOHN

"What is that to thee? follow thou Me."--John 21:22.

WE ARE standing on the eastern shore of the Lake of Galilee. The morning breeze blows fresh in our faces; the tiny wavelets run up with a silvery ripple, and die on the white sand; across the expanse of water the white buildings of Tiberias and Capernaum gleam forth. With gunwale all wet and slippery a fishing-smack is drawn up on the deserted shore; near it the nets unbroken, although they had been heavy with finny spoils; yonder the remnants of a fisherman's breakfast and the dying embers of a fire.

The Master has just reinstated his erring apostle and friend, and proceeded to describe the death by which he was ultimately to glorify God: "Verily, verily, I say unto thee, when thou wast young, thou girdedst thyself, and walkedst whither thou wouldest; but when thou shalt be old, thou shalt stretch forth thy hands, and another shall gird thee, and carry thee whither thou wouldest not."

How different this forecast to what Peter would have chosen for himself! What a contrast between that yielding to the will of another, and that impetuous nature which so constantly betrayed itself! Take, for instance, the occasions that are offered in this chapter. As soon as he hears John's suggestion that the Lord is standing on the beach, he lets go the fish that he had spent all night to catch, the nets which it cost hours to make, the boat which was probably his own property, binds his fisher's coat about him, plunges into the water, and never rests till he has cast himself at his Master's feet. As soon as the Lord expresses his desire to mingle some of the recent haul with his own preparations for breakfast, he springs up, hastens to the margin of the sea, drags the net to land, counts its contents, and brings specimens to the little group gathered about the Master. Every movement so quick and energetic! To wish, is to act! To desire a thing, to do it! He makes us think of young manhood in all its vigorous, nervous life.

The Lord did not damp or repress his fervid disciple. He looked on him, to borrow the thought of another, with tender pity; as a parent, who has passed through many of the world's darkest places, beholds the child who is speaking of what he expects life to bring. Fresh from his own agony, the Lord knew how different a temper that would be which had been induced by prolonged suffering and patience: and He knew how necessary it was that that temper should be induced in his beloved disciple, so that he might become a pillar in his Church, and the tender sympathetic writer of that First Epistle, which is so saturated with a spirit of tender patience and sympathy for all who suffer.

Having uttered these cautionary words our Lord seems to have moved away, bidding Peter follow--a mandate which was intended to carry a deeper meaning. John followed them some few steps in the rear. Hearing footsteps, Peter turned and saw him, and with a touch of unworthy curiosity, hardly compatible with the seriousness of the statement Jesus had just made, said, "Lord, and what shall this man do?"

The question was objectionable. It savoured too much of Peter's old, hasty, forward self. The Lord would not become a mere fortune-teller to gratify his inquisitiveness. He put a check, therefore, on the unbefitting inquiry, and yet, in rebuking, answered it: "If I will that he tarry till I come, what is that to thee? follow thou Me."

It is not easy to explain the import of Christ's reply. Some have interpreted it as meaning Christ's coming in death. But this can hardly be; for He would as certainly come to Peter dying amid the agony of martyrdom, as to John dying in a peaceful old age. Surely the period referred to must have been the fall of Jerusalem, only forty years distant, and to which our Lord so often referred as one phase at least of his coming. Then the old economy would fall and pass away; Christianity assume a world-wide importance; and the cross become one of the mightiest factors of human history.

When those words were repeated to them, some of the disciples interpreted them as meaning that John should not die, but they did not convey that meaning to John himself; he only saw in them a general intimation that his lot was in his Master's hands, and in any case would be a very different one from Peter's.

I. OUR LIFE-PLAN IS FASHIONED BY THE WILL OF CHRIST.

What royalty there is in those words, If I will? If Jesus were less than divine, how blasphemous they would appear! What arrogance to suppose that He could regulate the time and manner of life or death! Yet how natural it is to hear Him speak thus. No one starts or is surprised, and in that calm acquiescence there is a testimony to the homogeneousness of Christ's character. It is of one piece

throughout. There is a perfect consistency between his acts and words.

The ancients thought of their lives as woven on the loom of spiteful fates, whom they endeavoured to humour by calling euphonious names. The materialist supposes that his life is the creature of circumstances, a rudderless ship in a current, mere flotsam and jetsam on the wave. The Christian knows that the path of his life has been prepared for him to walk in; and that its sphere, circumstances, and character are due to the thought and care of Him who has adapted it to our temperament and capabilities, to repress the worst, and educate the best within us.

We are ignorant of the place and mode of our death. Our grave may be in ocean depths with storm-blasts as our dirge, or the desert-waste with the sands as our winding-sheets. Like that of Moses in a foreign land, unknown and untended; or within the reach of friendly hands, which will keep it freshly decked with evergreens. But wherever it may be, it must befall as Christ has willed. We may die by some lingering agony, or the gentle slackening of life's silver cord. The temple may be shattered by an earthquake, or taken down stone by stone. But whether the one or the other, it will be determined by his will. He who makes the hue of each fading leaf different from that of any other in the forest, has some new trait of godliness, some fresh feature of grace to illustrate and enforce in the dying hour; it is therefore written, "Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints."

There is no lasting happiness, no comfort, no peace, to be had in this life, apart from the belief that the so-called trifles, as well as the apparently greater incidents of existence, are included in the circumference of Christ's will, either executive or permissive. But in speaking thus, I discriminate between ourselves and our surroundings. I am speaking more particularly of the latter, and urge that even where they are apparently moulded by the carelessness or malignity of others, yet these are, unconsciously indeed, but really, effecting what He predetermined should be done. "If I will."

Bind this to your heart. It may be appointed for you to die in early prime, when the purpose of your life seems unfulfilled; or to live a sequestered life, banished to the Patmos of exile and suffering, dying after long years. But in any case, your Saviour has contrived and adjusted all. And He will send the Angel of his Presence with you, to help you, and to bring you to the place that He has prepared.

II. THE LIFE-COURSE OF ANY IS DETERMINED BY THE PECULIARITIES OF CHARACTER AND SERVICE.

Christ tells us that we are destined to a long future; and in doing so gives us the only satisfactory clue to the mystery of existence. If there be no life beyond death, life is a maze of endless wandering, to which there is no clue. But if there be--and after all there is no if in it--we can easily understand that the present needs to be carefully adjusted to our nature and our future niche in the great universe of God, that we may be able, to the farthest limit, to realise our Master's anticipations.

There is a conspicuous illustration of this before us. Peter was to be the apostle of sufferers, and write a letter, which should help, as perhaps no other writing has helped, all sufferers to the end of time; but he could never have penned it apart from the fiery trials through which his character was softened and sanctified. How could he have spoken of the humility, meekness, and patience, of the suffering believer, had he not drunk deeply of the cup of suffering for himself and lived in constant anticipation of the martyr-death of which the Lord spoke?

John's work, on the other hand, was to declare, as he does in the Book of Revelation, that Jesus is the Living One, unchanged and unchanging, the King of earth and heaven. And how could he have produced that marvellous work, and received and reported those sublime visions, if he had not lingered on, in loneliness and exile, till Jerusalem had fallen before Titus and his legions, the Temple been destroyed, and the Jews scattered to every nation under heaven?

Neither of these men understood at the time what he was being prepared for. But as each now from heaven reviews the work he did, and the way in which he was prepared for doing it; as each compares the discipline through which he passed with the peculiarities of the people he was to address, and the testimony he was to deliver, he must be full of glad acknowledgments of the perfect adaptation of means to ends, of instrumentalities to results.

And what is manifestly true of them is equally so of each of us. Not always in this world, but in the next, we shall discern the admirable fitness of the discipline through which we passed, to prepare us for our position and ministry both here and hereafter.

Great and marvellous are thy works,

O Lord God the Almighty;

Righteous and true are thy ways,

Thou King of the ages.

III. WHILST GOD IS WORKING OUT OUR LIFE-PLAN, WE MUST GIVE OURSELVES TO PRACTICAL OBEDIENCE.

"Follow thou Me."

The Master reiterated this command, both when He told Peter his destiny, and when his apostle was prying into secrets with which he had no immediate concern. Whatever threatens us, looming in the future, we must not be deterred from following our Master; and we are not to waste our time in speculation as to matters which lie beyond our ken, but apply ourselves to the practical duties which lie ready to our hand.

But what is it to follow Christ? It is not to live an oriental life beneath these northern skies, nor wear an eastern garb, nor speak in the Hebrew tongue. A man might do all these, and in addition wander like Him, homeless and outcast, through the land, and yet not follow in his steps. No! Following Jesus means our identification in the principles that underlay his life, in his devotion and prayer, in his absolute compliance with God's will, in his constant service of mankind, in the sweetness and gentleness and strength of his personal character. There is no path of legitimate duty into which we are called to go, in which He does not precede; for when He putteth forth his own sheep, He goeth before them, and his sheep follow. As of old, his disciples saw Him going before them ascending up to Jerusalem, and they followed Him; there is no path of arduous duty and suffering in which He does not still precede.

Following Christ involves almost certain suffering at first. When Peter asked what they would have, who had left all to follow Jesus, the Master did not hesitate to say that the bitter herb of suffering would mingle with all the dishes with which their table might be spread : and when James and John tried to bespeak the right and left seats of the throne, He spoke of the cup and baptism of pain. But afterwards, when the cross and grave are passed, then the fullness of joy and the pleasures which are at God's right hand for evermore!

We may follow Christ, and yet our paths diverge. Peter and John had been close friends. In them, the binary stars of love and zeal, labour and rest, action and contemplation, revolved in a common orbit. Together at the grave, in the boat, in the temple, in prison; but their outward fellowship was not permitted to continue; perhaps if it had, it would have been too absorbing. It is in silence and solitude that spirits attain their complete beauty, and so the Master is sometimes obliged to say to us, "What is that to thee? follow thou Me."

In following Jesus, with the shadow of the cross always on his spirit, Peter learned to sympathise with his Master's anticipation of death, which in earlier years had been incomprehensible to him, and had led him to say, "That be far from Thee, Lord"; and it gave him finally the opportunity of fulfilling his first resolve to go with Him to prison and to death. We often think ourselves strong to do and suffer long before patience had done her perfect work. We rush impetuously forward, and are overwhelmed. Then our Master has to lead us about, to take us round by another and longer route, to train us by toils and tears and teachings, till, hopeless of our own strength and confident in his, in our old age we cry, "I must put off this my tabernacle, even as our Lord Jesus Christ hath showed me."

If the old legend is true, Peter was crucified with his head downwards, because he felt unworthy to be so like his Lord--following Him with humility and reverence. But whatever befalls us, whatever be the nature of our experience in life or death, let it be our one aim to glorify God. "And the God of all grace, who hath called us unto his eternal glory in Christ, after that we have suffered a little while, shall Himself perfect, stablish, strengthen us. To Him be the dominion for ever and ever. Amen."

7 BACK TO THE FATHER

"And there are also many other things which Jesus did." John 21:25.

ONCE MORE, as we learn both from the Gospel according to Matthew and the First Epistle to Corinthians, our Lord met the eleven apostles, together with some five hundred brethren beside, on a mountain in Galilee, chosen partly for retirement and seclusion, and partly that all might see Him. The majority of these were alive when Paul wrote. "And Jesus came and spake unto them, saying, All power is given unto Me in heaven and in earth. Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them into the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the age."
Only once or twice beside did the Lord appear. He was seen of James, and this interview seems to have determined this saintly man, who was his own brother, either through a previous marriage of Joseph, or as born after his own birth, of Mary, to become a humble follower of Him with whose existence his own was so mysteriously blended. Then He appeared once more to all the apostles, and being assembled with them commanded them to wait in Jerusalem till the promise of the Father was fulfilled, that He would send them another Comforter, the Holy Ghost. "For John," He said, "truly baptized with water; but ye shall be baptized with the Holy Ghost not many days hence."

There seems to have been an interval at that point, during which the disciples had time to think over what the Lord had said. It had suggested to them the idea of the setting-up of the Messianic kingdom, which had always been viewed as coincident with the bestowal of the Holy Ghost. "Lord," they said when they came together again, "wilt Thou restore at this time the kingdom to Israel?" The Lord would not gratify their curiosity, and at that moment it would have been useless to combat and explain their erroneous views. This must be left to the education of time, and circumstance, and that same Spirit. These things were kept in the Father's secret counsels. It was not for them to know, but they should receive power.

Then, with the tenacity of affection for the scenes of his former life, He led them out as far as Bethany. And when they had reached the beloved spot, associated with so many sacred and tender memories, He lifted up his hands and blessed them; and while He blessed them, He was parted from them and a cloud became both vail and chariot, parting them and receiving Him out of their sight.

Thence He ascended far above all principality, power, might, and dominion, through all heavens to the right hand of the Father, there to pursue his life of ministry and prayer for men, and specially for those He loved. And angels stood beside the little group of lovers, assuring them of his return in the same manner as they had seen Him go. And they worshipped Him, and went forth, and preached everywhere, the Lord working with them, and confirming their word with signs following.

THE END