

Studies in the Gospel of St. John.

VI.

SPECIAL TOPICS.

AFTER mastering the contents of the Gospel as a whole, it is necessary and important to proceed to the definite study of details. This method is of great value and is capable of almost indefinite explanation because of the fullness of matter in the Gospel. The following points are only intended to be suggestive of further study, and at the same time illustrative of similar possible themes.

I. THE DOCTRINE OF THE GODHEAD. 1. His existence (i. 1). 2. His spirituality (i. 18; iv. 24; v. 37; vi. 46). 3. His manifestation (i. 18). 4. His nature (iii. 16). 5. His life (i. 14; vi. 57). These are only a few of the aspects of the doctrine of God scattered through the Gospel, calling for careful consideration and arrangement.

II. THE PERSON AND WORK OF CHRIST. Through the Apostle we are to arrive at the mind of the Lord Jesus, for his purpose beyond all else is to reveal his Master. Every part of the Gospel keeps this idea in view, and looking first at the Gospel as a whole we may think of it as giving a threefold manifestation of Christ. 1. As the Divine Messiah (chaps. i.-xii.). 2. As the disciples' Master (chaps. xiii.-xvii.). 3. As the world's Redeemer (chaps. xviii.-xxi.). Thus we may say that Christ is seen (*a*) as the Word revealing the character of God and His purpose for man; (*b*) as the man revealing God's ideal for human life and the chasm made by sin; (*c*) as the Saviour accomplishing God's will and restoring man to union and communion with God.

But beyond these general aspects we may look still more closely at the detail given of Christ's Person and work. 1. His relation to God; (*a*) as the Word (i. 1); (*b*) as the Son (i. 14). 2. His revelation of God; (*a*) God in Himself (iv. 24); (*b*) God in relation to man (i. 12). For this point special study should be devoted to the discourses in each chapter. 3. His Divine claims: (*a*) In acts (ii. 15); (*b*) in word (viii. 58). "Either He is God or He is not good." 4. His perfect humanity: (*a*) Subject to our physical conditions (iv. 16): (*b*) submitting to our moral conditions (v.

19, 20). 5. His relation to the Jews (as Messiah). See especially chaps. i.-xii. 6. His relation to all men : (a) Light (i. 4), (knowledge) ; (b) life (i. 13) (power). See especially i. 14, 17. " Grace (love) and Truth (light)." 7. His relation to the Church. See especially Chapters xiii. to xvii.

III. THE REVELATION OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. This is another of the important features of the Fourth Gospel, especially when considered in the light of the Synoptic Gospels, and the fuller revelation in the Acts and Epistles.

1. The first stage (chaps. i.-vii.). The figure of water is seen, symbolizing (a) the incoming Spirit (chap. iii.) : (b) the indwelling Spirit (chap. iv.) : (c) the outflowing Spirit (chap. vii.). It is also to be noted that i. 32, 33 and iii. 34, associate the Spirit with Christ as at once the Receiver and Giver.

2. The second stage (chaps. xiv.-xvi.). The remarkable revelation of the Spirit on the eve of our Lord's departure, giving the new name Paraclete and various new offices with the strong emphasis on the Spirit's Personality (" He ").

3. The third stage (chap. xx.). The Easter gift of the Spirit is the culminating point of our Lord's earthly manifestation and was perhaps intended as an anticipation of and preparation for Pentecost.

IV. THE REVELATION OF " LIFE." As this is the specific purpose and main characteristic of the Gospel (xx. 31 ; x. 10), it seems to call for fuller attention, though at best this can only be fragmentary. Beyond and above all else Christianity is the religion of life. Eternal life is " the gift of God " (Rom. vi. 23) ; this gift is intended for " justification of life " (Rom. v. 18) ; the believer is to " walk in newness of life " (Rom. vi. 4) ; the Holy Spirit is called " the Spirit of life " (Rom. viii. 2) ; and Christ is our priest " after the power of an endless life " (Heb. vii. 17). In harmony with this we read in Bunyan's immortal allegory that the cry of Christian as he left the city of destruction was " Life ! Life ! Eternal Life ! " John's Gospel is pre-eminently the Gospel of life. Matthew speaks of righteousness ; Mark of service ; Luke of grace ; but John may be said to include all these and very much more by his emphasis on life. While life is mentioned in each of

the Gospels it is far more fully treated in the Fourth than elsewhere, and in particular it is regarded both as a present blessing (vi. 47), and also as connected with a future state (v. 29). At times we find the mention simply of "life"; at others of "eternal life," but between these there is no difference (iii. 36). Life is found in almost every chapter under various aspects.

1. *The Nature.* First of all, we must inquire as to the precise meaning of life as depicted in the New Testament, and especially in John. It is very much more than existence, and always implies and involves the thought of union. Indeed, every reference to life will be found to mean union. Thus, physical life is the union of the soul and the body; spiritual life is the union of the soul and God; while everlasting life in the fullest sense is the union of body and soul for ever with God. And so life spiritual, here and now, means the possession of the Divine nature, the union of the soul with God in Christ and the consciousness of fellowship resulting from it (John xvii. 3). It is impossible for even the ablest man to *define* life; it can only be *described* in its effects; and the one sufficient description of "eternal life" is union and communion with God. This is what St. Paul meant when he spoke of Christ as "our life" (Col. iii. 4).

2. *The Source.* This is seen in the opening words "in Him was life" (i. 4). This is the fount and starting-point (1 John v. 20). Life is so important and prominent in nature that it needs an adequate explanation, and nothing material or mechanical or human can account for it. Life always comes from life. God is the Source.

3. *The Beginning.* We see this in connection with the new birth (iii. 7), where our Lord emphasizes first the fact and then the method, the "what" and the "how." First, the fact of regeneration is shown and its necessity emphasized, and then, the way of its attainment is seen in the requirement of faith in Christ (iii. 15). The opposite of life is said to be death (iii. 16), and just as life in all its aspects means union, so death in its various elements means separation. Physical death means the separation of soul and body; spiritual death means the separation of the soul from God; everlasting death means the separation of body and soul from God for ever. Those who disbelieve are said not to "see life" (iii. 36). Thus we are reminded that Christianity is the introduction of a

new power, and not merely the provision of new knowledge. Knowledge cannot save; there must be life.

4. *The Indwelling.* Reception will necessarily be followed by realization, and the soul that has received God's life and is born again will be conscious of it as "living water" (iv. 11). This realization will in turn be followed by satisfaction, for in union and communion with Christ, our Life, we "never thirst," but find in Him "a well of water springing up unto eternal life" (iv. 14).

5. *The Possession.* A new thought about life is suggested in almost every chapter, and as we contemplate the next section of John's Gospel we are reminded that the Lord Jesus Christ has been appointed by the Father to give us life (v. 21), and that this life is at once a present possession (v. 24) and a future promise (v. 25). The cause of all this is Christ Himself Who has this life (v. 26), and Who is, therefore, able to communicate it to those who receive Him. The word "eternal" here and elsewhere is particularly important, because it implies quality rather than duration. We possess the life now, and it is simply because of its Divine quality that it necessarily lasts for ever.

6. *The Sustainance.* It is very striking that, after Christ claims to be the Source of life (chap. v.), He uses various symbols or metaphors in the following chapters to prove this possession of "life in Himself." Thus in chapter vi. He is shown to be the support of the life of which He is the source. Just as in physical life it is essential to absorb and assimilate matter, so in things spiritual Christ is the Living Bread Who must be appropriated, and the chapter is full of the most striking expressions about eating Him and eating His flesh and blood (vi. 35, 51, 53, 56, 57, 58). Nothing could be more significant and impressive than this almost constant reiteration and increased intensity in regard to the appropriation of Christ.

7. *The Overflow.* It is interesting to observe the three uses of the symbol of "water" in these chapters. In chapter iii. "born of water" symbolizes the incoming of the Spirit. In chapter iv. the "living water" indicates the indwelling Spirit. In chapter vii. 38 "rivers of living water," suggest the overflowing Spirit. That which we receive and possess is to be passed on to others, and from within us will flow rivers of life, giving blessing to those around. This is taken on the usual interpretation that it refers to believers,

but there is much to be said for the suggestion made in the Companion Bible, under chapter vii. 37, that the reference is to the Lord Jesus Christ as the Giver, rather than to the believer as the receiver. But in either case the thought of "living water" clearly implies a constant, perennial and absolutely unfailling source of supply.

8. *The Power.* When the Lord Jesus Christ spoke of Himself as the Light of the World, He said that His followers should not walk in darkness, but "have the light of life" (viii. 12). This seems to refer back to the opening statement that "the life was the light of men" (see also ix. 5 ; xii. 46). It is the possession of life that gives light, for, when we receive into our hearts the Lord Jesus Christ as our Saviour, Friend and Master, the result is such an access of spiritual experience that perception, insight, knowledge become ours, as we follow our Master. There is perhaps nothing more striking in Christian life than the way in which the follower of Christ obtains light on many a dark part of his circumstances.

9. *The Abundance.* The Lord Jesus did not come to bestow life only, great though that is, but that the believer might have it in abundance (x. 10). We are not to be content with anything less than this. And the difference is often the difference between a poor, weak and anæmic Christianity and one that pulsates with freshness, vigour and energy. It is unfortunately only too possible for us to have merely a little warmth or a little heat when we ought to be thoroughly energized, and it is only too possible to be just saved instead of having the enjoyment of Christ's abundant salvation.

10. *The Condition.* In two successive chapters Christ teaches the solemn yet blessed lesson that life is possible only through death. In connection with Lazarus, Jesus Christ is the Resurrection and the Life (xi. 25). And, when the Greeks came to see Him, He at once spoke of the grain of wheat dying in order that it might produce life and fruit. So, even though Christ was to be put to death, the raising of Lazarus showed that He had the power to guarantee victory ; and in the same way, even though the disciple of Christ loses his life in this world, he finds and preserves it unto life eternal (xii. 25).

11. *The Outcome.* While the message about abiding and fruitfulness (chap. xv.) does not specifically mention life, the thought is there all through, implying that only as we are united in life to

Christ can we produce fruit that will abide. Then in the great prayer our Lord seems to sum up everything by the thought of the Father having given Him authority to give eternal life to all believers, a life that is defined as knowing God and Jesus Christ (xvii. 3). This constitutes the essential glory of life, that we are one with Christ and one with the Father in Him. There is nothing higher, truer, nobler than this thought of union with God in Christ (xvii. 21-23).

12. *The Secret.* The Apostle reminds us in the statement of his purpose that this life is possible only "in His Name" (xx. 31). The "name" always stands for the revealed character, and "in" inevitably and invariably means union. So that our "life" is found in fellowship through believing. Faith links us to Christ and thereby produces that union, the outcome of which is communion, which necessarily lasts for ever and ever.

V. THE TEACHING ON "FAITH." We have already seen that the whole Gospel is intended to elicit faith, and the mere occurrence of the word "believe" shows the importance of the material of the Gospel in this respect. In Matthew we find the word eleven times; in Mark fifteen; in Luke nine; while in John it occurs about a hundred times. A great American teacher, the late Dr. Dwight, of Yale, used to base his exposition of St. John on the discovery that the main purpose of the Gospel was to create faith, and yet more faith in the hearts of the disciples. One of his disciples recently remarked that Dr. Dwight showed how successive passages end with sentences recording the growth of faith in the little band around our Lord: "His disciples believed on Him" (ii. 11). "Many believe on His Name" (ii. 23). "Many of the Samaritans believed on Him" (iv. 39). "The man believed" (iv. 50, 53). "Many believed on Him there" (x. 42). This is seen in one way or another to the very end. But it is important to try to analyse this faith by looking at some of its features as here recorded.

1. *Its Source* (i. 36, 37). It was elicited through personal contact with Jesus Christ based on testimony.

2. *Its Elements.* These may be said to be two, marking the stages of growth: (a) believing the message (v. 47); and (b) trusting the Person (xiv. 11).

3. *Its Manifestation.* This is seen in two ways. First, by devotion to Christ (i. 49), and then by confession of Him (vi. 69).

This is only a little of the wonderful wealth in this Gospel in connection with faith, and special attention should be given to the personal types of faith here recorded. From the very outset to the close men and women are seen exercising a faith and manifesting it in a wonderful and beautiful variety of ways.

VI. THE TEACHING ON UNBELIEF. We have already observed how the revelation of Christ invariably led to a twofold attitude being taken up, the one involving reception through faith, and the other expressing itself in an exactly opposite direction. It is this contrast between belief and unbelief that constitutes one of the most vital and impressive features of this remarkable Gospel. Here again we must endeavour to analyse unbelief and see what it really means.

1. *Its Nature.* It consists in one simple but all embracing fact, the rejection of Christ. Whatever may have been the causes or explanation, unbelief is simply the unwillingness to recognize and receive Christ in His claim to be Saviour and God.

2. *Its Phases.* As we study the Gospel we notice the gradual development of this unbelief. (a) It commences with murmuring at something that Christ said or did (ii. 18). (b) Then follows hatred as the outcome of this murmuring (v. 16; vi. 41). (c) The culminating point was hostility (vii. 1). It is always so with the attitude of unbelief. It starts with some objection involved in the claim of Christ, and if this unwillingness to surrender continues, animosity and deadly opposition are the inevitable outcome.

3. *Its Destiny.* The outcome of unbelief is death, understood as separation from God, just as the outcome of faith is life, understood as union with God (xvii. 3).

As the Gospel is studied carefully for the various elements of unbelief, it is important to look at the record of personal types like Caiaphas, Pilate and others. All of them united in rejection of Christ though they reached their goal by various ways. It may perhaps be asked why so much space is given to this topic, and the answer is probably that the revelation of Christ could not be understood historically in any other way. Thus, unbelief leading to rejection may be said to solve the problem of the Jewish attitude

to Christ which was such a stumbling block to the early Church. It shows that they were unreasonable and wicked and had no excuse (v. 39, 40). Their rejection was hostility to light (iii. 20); enmity to truth (viii. 45) and at heart, hatred of God (xv. 24).

VII. THE MIRACLES. These constitute a special feature of St. John's Gospel and demand the closest attention.

1. They are always called "signs," that is, tokens of something higher than themselves. In the other Gospels they are described as "wonders," expressive of the effect on the beholders, and as "powers," indicative of the conclusion that those who saw them came to as they endeavoured to account for them. But John goes higher still in speaking of them as "signs," that is, symbols, proofs, messages, object lessons of spiritual truths, embodied in the works themselves.

2. There are eight recorded, seven before and one after the Resurrection.

3. Each one should be studied with all possible care for its revelation of some specific manifestation of the glory of Christ (ii. 11).

VIII. OTHER STUDIES. The Gospel is so varied in its material that it is only possible to touch in the briefest way on some of the other topics included. Perhaps the following may be suggestive both on their own account and also of other elements to be found in this remarkable portion of Scripture.

1. The teaching on sin: its nature, aspects and end.

2. The seven conversions recorded: Each with its aspect of Christ's revelation and the corresponding response.

3. Some characteristic and important words like: "Witness," "truth," "judge," "darkness," "light," "glory," "world," "death," "My Word," "in that day." As an illustration of what can be derived from a study of these and similar words we may concentrate on the term "witness," which is found some fifty times. In v. 31-50, there are four witnesses, one human and three Divine (verses 33, 36, 37, 39). Then Christ Himself is spoken of as a witness, and these, with the witness of the Holy Spirit and believers (xv. 26, 27), constitute the sevenfold testimony which is intended to elicit and assure faith.

Other ideas, words and phrases can easily be found like "mani-

fested," "I am," "world," "verily, verily," and the various present participles in the Greek. These characteristic expressions are all the more remarkable because of the comparative absence of other words found frequently elsewhere. Thus "repentance," and "repent," are found in the three Synoptic Gospels, but not once here; and "righteousness" and "righteous" found nineteen times in Matthew, twice in Mark, and eleven in Luke, are only found three times here. On the other hand, the Divine Fatherhood is referred to in Matthew forty-four times; in Mark five times; in Luke twenty times; and in John a hundred and twenty-one times. The proportion in regard to such terms as "world," "truth," "light," and "love," is also noteworthy. Thus in Matthew "world" occurs nine times, in Mark, three; in Luke three; in John seventy-nine. In Matthew "truth" occurs once, in Mark three times; in Luke three times; in John twenty-five. "Light" is found in Matthew seven times; in Mark once; in Luke six; in John twenty-two. And "love," is seen in Matthew seven times; in Mark four times; in Luke six times; and in John thirty-six. In view of the bitter hostility of the Jews, as recorded in this Gospel, these figures are also noteworthy. Matthew mentions the Jew five times; Mark seven; Luke five; and John seventy-one.

4. The sevenfold gifts in the one gift in iii. 16. Christ Himself is said to be God's gift, and He Himself then gives in turn His flesh (vi. 27), His life (x. 28), His example (xiii. 15), the Comforter (xiv. 16), His peace (xiv. 27), His word (xvii. 8), and His glory (xvii. 22).

5. The five manifestations of Christ to the Jews as seen at various times and under various circumstances in chapters i.-xii.

6. The relation of the Gospel and the Epistle. The one intended to lead to faith (xx. 30, 31), and the other to knowledge (1 John v. 13).

As we review these outline Studies of the Gospel according to St. John it is only too clear that the merest fringe of the subject has been touched. Reference has already been made to that great scholar and true-hearted Christian, Dr. Timothy Dwight, who felt that in the Fourth Gospel we have an absolutely trustworthy reflection of the experiences of an immediate follower of Jesus Christ, and he never swerved from the conviction that the mind of the

disciple named John was the creative mind behind this book. One day when discussing the incident of Mary's anointing the feet of our Lord, he pointed with evident satisfaction to the little mark of authenticity found in the third verse of the twelfth chapter which says, "and the house was filled with the odour of the ointment." One who was present said that looking round the class with a characteristic twinkle in his eye, he remarked "myths don't smell that way." On another occasion when his class was lingering on that significant verse, "he that eateth My flesh and drinketh My blood hath eternal life," Dr. Dwight said quietly, "Gentlemen, the Lord's Supper will in time convert the world." He was not thinking of the Sacrament itself but of the steady power of the life and death of Christ as they are received in the disciples and expressed through them.

Some utterances of another scholar, Professor Riggs, of Auburn, New York, may fitly close our consideration.

"Our study of this noble Gospel has come to an end. To that study which makes experience, life the chief interpreter, there can never be an end. It calls us to go on to know the Lord through all the profound realities of communion and obedience which involve the ultimate depths of life. The deeper we go by this way of interpretation the surer shall we be that this is no fabricated portrait of the Master. It is rather the picture of one who saw not merely the scenery of Galilee and Judea, nor simply the external forms of that memorable group now known as Master and Disciples, but whose profoundly religious spirit, touched, illumined, guided by the Spirit of Truth, grasped the eternal significance of Him to whom His life had been given. Is there a subjective element in John? Of course there is, but it is the subjectivism of one whose insight was directed to the inner, eternal meanings of Jesus. Rightly has it been said that John saw Jesus and His truth *sub specie Eternitatis*. Does that make the Gospel less true? Evidence enough there is of its historicity. No other Gospel is more faithful to historical situations; no other Gospel is more keenly alive to psychological presentations. Its portraiture of Jesus, different as is its setting from that of the Synoptics, is thoroughly consistent with theirs. What they exhibit constantly in action and now and then by word is here completely interpreted in that blaze of glory which casts a noon-day clearness upon the person and character of the Messiah."

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