

John - Commentaries by J. Wilson Smith

Christian Truth: Volume 37, Thomas Called Didymus (20:24-29)

John 20:24-29

On the evening of the first day of the week-the resurrection day, that day so great with victory-a little company of men had assembled secretly and perhaps spontaneously. as drawn together by new bonds. They were the disciples of Jesus. Fear of the Jews had made them close the ' doors, for already diversity of religious interests began to separate the true from the false, and lead the faithful minority to seek shelter from persecution. As they assembled in the quiet hours of the evening, their hearts were free to dwell on the marvelous event of the morning. The Lord was risen. He had been seen and heard. The very Jesus whom they had seen nailed to the tree, and whose side had been pierced, was now actually alive again.

Often He had told them that He was to die and be raised again the third day, yet they had never truly believed His words. Then, they witnessed His death and burial and sorrow filled their hearts, for they had lost everything. The whole scene was only desolation to each of those whose very being had been wrapped up in a living Christ. Then they heard of His having risen. Their burdened hearts now filled with hope. His words began to take shape in their memories. The third day had come, and with it the report of His resurrection. Could it be true?

We are not told what the disciples were discussing as they met behind closed doors, but while they were conversing together, Jesus entered and stood in the midst and said, "Peace be unto you." Calm and calming, peaceful and peace-giving, the risen Lord placed Himself amid His assembled disciples. How full of gracious majesty!

A few days before, these very men had all forsaken Him and fled, yet now not a word of rebuke escaped His lips. He 'did not taunt them with their unfaithfulness; He did not upbraid them for their ignorance. He did not forsake them, but in their very midst He proclaimed peace to them as the result of the battle fought and the victory won. Peace had been made by the blood of the cross, with pardon to the believer and eternal honor to the Savior. That peace was the fruit of the soul travail of the Son of God, and is the abiding portion of all who are His. What a salvation for such a company! What a word to burst from the lips of the risen One as He owns them as His brethren!

"And when He had so said, He showed unto them His hands and His side," tenderly corroborating by tangible tokens the truth of His words, and identifying Himself to them by unmistakable proofs. Once more He said, "Peace be unto you," and then He sent them as the Father had sent Him. Then He breathed upon them and said, "Receive ye the Holy Ghost." How rich an investiture! Having peace, they were free to go as His missionaries in blest occupation with His interests and more than that, they were possessed of His life in the power of the Holy Spirit. Such was the result of this first meeting of the disciples after the Lord's resurrection.

"But Thomas... called Didymus, was not with them when Jesus came." How was that? Why was Thomas absent at such a moment? He had never expected that

Jesus would preside there, or else he surely would have been present. Was self-will at work? Had he heard the report of the morning, and discredited it? Was the news too good to be true? Was the resurrection of Jesus impossible? Whatever the reason, Thomas was absent from this informal meeting of his fellow disciples, and he was the loser. He missed hearing those words of peace and of liberty. He missed seeing the Lord's hands and side. He missed that first sight of their Lord, as in grace He placed Himself in the midst of His brethren. How much we, too, may lose through a little willful neglect! It is often ruinous to despise meetings of true hearts just because they are small. The Lord may select such as spheres of rich unfoldings of Himself in His Word.

The disciples told Thomas that they had seen the Lord, but he refused to believe them. A mere sight of Jesus would not suffice for him. No, unless he could put his finger into the print of the nails, and thrust his hand into the side, he would not believe. The disciples had said all they could. It was outside their power to communicate faith to their unbelieving brother. In such a case the help of man is vain. The perplexed and troubled soul must have to do personally, directly and individually with God. "They looked unto Him, and were lightened: and their faces were not ashamed." Psalm 34:5.

Thomas, though loud and willful, was sincere. He loved his Master, and would have died with Him in Judea at the occasion of His raising Lazarus. His unbelief was of the head, and not of the heart, and so after eight long days, the Lord, on the occasion of a similar assembly, told Thomas to reach hither his finger, and behold His hand, and to reach hither his hand and thrust it into His side. He told him to gratify his desire to the full and to find every satisfaction for his greatest difficulty-to discover indeed, in those unclosed wounds, those everlasting evidences of redeeming love, the complete dissolution of the doubts of unbelief. Jesus said to Thomas, "Be not faithless, but believing." "Thomas answered and said unto Him, My Lord and my God."

Could patient grace or perfect love have done more? Signs could have been given and evidences produced! They are abundant. God could accomplish any external display. But if Thomas believed by seeing, they are more blessed who believe without seeing.

Israel will one day see and believe. We are called on now to the more blessed portion of believing apart from every evidence except the written Word of God. It suffices for God. Let it suffice for us.

"Blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed."

It was Malchus whose ear Peter had cut off in a spirit of wild and reckless enthusiasm. Peter, always energetic, had used the sword in order to defend his Master from His foes. But the sword-the weapon of vengeance-was out of place in such a defense. The Lord was about to surrender Himself into the hands of sinful men for the fulfillment of His mission here below; and self-defense was therefore no part of His gracious plan. He abandoned it in order to accomplish the Scriptures. He had already, while His disciples slept, passed in spirit through the dread ordeal, and was now prepared for all that was to happen.

But such an act of surrender was in contrast with the rash and impulsive disciple. His sleep had ill prepared him for such a trial. He awoke unconscious of the nature of the temptation and of his own moral inability to face it. He, like Samson, was shorn of his locks, yet he flew to the sword; he appealed in his weakest moment to the weapon of natural strife. His intention was, no doubt, good, but his conduct was sadly at fault.

He strikes and cuts off the ear of Malchus. Now, who was Malchus? He was the servant of the high priest. Is this fact not remarkable? Was not the sound of his master's feet behind him? It was, though at some distance. The high priest could hardly, with the propriety becoming his dignified office, sally forth at night in the company of the bloodthirsty crowd that made its way with torches and weapons to dark Gethsemane. No, he remained behind in his palace, but he sent Malchus to fill his place; and he it was who suffered under the stroke of Peter's sword. Had the high priest gone in person, the blow received by his servant would have fallen on him. But as it was, the servant of the high priest and the disciple of Jesus met in conflict, and the former was wounded.

Thus Peter does exploits, but they are out of keeping with the times. David had his "mighty men," the records of whose prowess are placed on the page of history. They fought and won by the use of carnal means; but they acted in keeping with their times.

Jesus came not to destroy men's lives, but to save them. His disciple did not understand.

How slow we are to learn grace, or to apprehend the unworldly, heavenly nature of Christianity! How slow to learn the differences that God has made in the dispensation of His ways! The law and the sword agreed well; but grace and the sword are absolutely incongruous. Nature understands the former and readily acts upon it, but the Christian should seek to know the latter and to act thereon. The disciple acted in law and used the sword; the blessed Master acted in grace and healed the ear of Malchus. How bright is the contrast!

For the rest of his days the servant of the high priest carried the healing touch of the Lord. How fully he might have described the difference between the hasty, rough disciple and the calm and gentle Master! Was his heart affected? Did he return to his master and declare the tender grace of Jesus to him? We are not informed. It is not Malchus, either wounded or healed, grateful or otherwise, who fills the eye at this crisis. It is the infinite grace of the blessed Lord whose forgiving and healing hand lays itself gently on the servant of His chief enemy. Such touches of His grace captivate the heart as they speak so unmistakably of who He was. Yes, the Scriptures present to us Jesus in His own perfection, not as compared to but as contrasted with men, and the best of men. Men come before us, indeed, in many different characters, but in the best estate are shown to be only "lighter than vanity"; whereas Jesus-Son of man, Son of God-holds His own peculiar place, "full of grace and truth," just in order that we might discover what that God is against whom we have sinned. For Jesus was, of a truth, God "manifest in the flesh"-a most wonderful fact and worthy of deep and reverent contemplation.

Think, dear reader, of God coming in flesh, of God assuming that condition (all sinless and perfect) in order that we who are in it, fallen and guilty and blinded by sin to all that God is, might get to know Him.

Creation with its innumerable wonders and beauties may tell of His power and skill, but it could not make Him known.

Jesus made Him known. "The only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, He hath declared Him." He was God manifest in the flesh. And in the flesh, a perfect Man (tempted in all points as we are, sin apart and in perfect grace as well as in perfect truth) He heals Malchus in lovely keeping with all His ways from the manger onward. What winsome grace!

In contrast, Peter's hasty conduct bore fruit to his sorrow. That fruit did not end with the sword stroke. Following his Master, now captive, into the palace of the high priest, he takes his place beside the other servants, in which evil company his identity is soon established. He is charged with being a disciple of Jesus, but stoutly denies the charge. Yet one of the company said, "Did not I see thee in the garden with Him?" What a home thrust, and how deeply it must have cut! And by whom was it made? Strange to say, by "his kinsman whose ear Peter cut off" (v. 26). His kinsman had seen the blow given, and now recognized the man who gave it. Here we have an eyewitness to Peter's mistaken zeal and murderous conduct.

Malchus and his kinsman had apparently led the band that followed the traitor, Judas Iscariot, eager to carry out the wishes of their high-priestly master; and being at the front, they were the more readily exposed to any opposition that might arise.

Malchus suffered from, and his kinsman bore witness to, the foolhardiness of Peter. And Peter, at fault in the garden, is still more at fault in the palace. There he strikes a foe; here he denies his Lord.

But did the kinsman, while quickly incriminating Peter, as quickly relate the healing touch of Jesus? Did he tell how speedily and thoroughly and gently the fault of the disciple was more than rectified by the very Master whom Peter now so heartlessly denied? We are not informed.

Little injuries are remembered when large acts of kindness are forgotten; for such is human nature, tainted as it is by sin. Hence, this exquisite proof of the forgiving grace of the blessed Lord may have passed out of the mind as a thing of no account.

Thank God that it is written on the page of inspiration, "He touched his ear, and healed him." Luke 22:51. And so Malchus may have presented himself for years before his master, bearing the visible mark of the healing touch of Jesus—an ever-present witness to His love and pity—who "when He was reviled, reviled not again; when He suffered, He threatened not; but committed Himself to Him that judgeth righteously." 1 Peter 2:23. Such exhibitions of His grace win the heart and endear Him to it.

Christian Truth: Volume 21, Let Her Alone (12:7)

"Let her alone: against the day of My burying hath she kept this." John 12:7.

Mary of Bethany, who had ere this found her happy place at the Master's feet, came to the supper prepared for Him just six days before His death, and poured upon His feet her very costly ointment of spikenard, the odor of which filled the house.

Her act of devotedness was directed toward the Lord Himself. It was in the nature of intelligent worship, but it provoked the hostility of the disciples. To them it was a "waste." They said that it should have been sold for three hundred pence and given to the poor. To them worship so pure and elevated seemed superfluous.

But the blessed Master viewed it otherwise, and placed upon it His own gracious interpretation. What they called a "waste," He recognized as heartfelt worship. In what they considered loss to "the poor," He saw an apprehension on her part of His coming death, an appreciation of His sufferings, which marked her as being in possession of the truth in a way unknown to them. "Against the day of My burying hath she kept this," were His words, just as though He gave her credit for anticipating and preparing for His burial; just as though it had been the leading thought in her mind, while His kingdom and glory had occupied those of the disciples. But the glory is reached through death. She was right, and they were 'wrong; and therefore He gently screens her from their cruel censures. He will not allow her to suffer under their aspersion. He spreads His sheltering wing around her, and firmly says, "Let her alone." If none can value her devotedness, He can, and does; and that is enough for Mary. Her Master's smile suffices. The sense of giving Him pleasure compensates for the misunderstanding of man. Blessed experience!

"Lord, let it alone this year also, till I shall dig about it, and dung it: and if it bear fruit, well: and if not, then after that thou shalt cut it down." Luke 13:8, 9.

"Let it alone this year also" was the prayer of the dresser of the vineyard on behalf of the fruitless fig tree. The lord of the vineyard had come and looked for fruit for three years and, being utterly disappointed, he gave commandment that it should be cut down. The tree cumbered the ground. It was occupying space that could be planted with profit. It was not only fruitless, but it was doing mischief. Such a fate became it. But the dresser, knowing that his lord was not a "hard man," and divining his thoughts of mercy, prayed that another year of grace might be shown, during which time he would do all in the way of pruning and culture that could be done; then, if fruit were still wanting, the blow should fall.

His prayer was granted, and the tree was "let alone" for one year more. But the fruitless fig tree fell. Israel, illustrated thus, yielded no fruit; Christ came seeking fruit and found none. Judgment called loudly for the cutting down of the fruitless tree, but mercy interposed, and another year of grace (protracted indeed until the death of Stephen; that is, until the definite rejection of the Holy Ghost) was allowed. Then the stroke fell; and the fruitless, mischievous nation was cut down as a nation. But how mercy lingered! How judgment delayed! How the voice of patient grace was heard saying, "Let it alone."

If that be true in the case of a nation, is it not likewise true in the case of the individual? "This year also"—and also, and also-until, alas! in spite of great long-suffering, no fruit can be found; and then, "after that," judgment, long suspended, overtakes the sinner, and he is "cut down"!

"Let them alone: they be blind leaders of the blind. And if the blind lead the blind, both shall fall into the ditch." Matt. 15:14.

A solemn verdict this—awfully solemn! It was spoken by Christ in reference to the false teachers of that day—the teachers who placed tradition above Scripture, and who taught

for doctrines the commandments of men. Of religion (such as it was) they had plenty, for they drew nigh with their mouth, but their heart was far from God. Oh, what a difference! Mouth-religion may be musical, eloquent, attractive, imposing, but most delusive. It may consist of prayer and chant and oratory, but never affect either the throne of God or the conscience of man. It may present the most splendid appearance outwardly, and withal leave the soul barren and unsatisfied.

It may appeal to history, to language, to learning, or to fathers, but pass over the plain, palpable facts of Scripture. The light of truth, its liberty, its moral power—all is unknown. It dwells in the unspiritual darkness of human thoughts and reasonings. Its teachers are blind, and by them the blind are led.

True of the first century, it is true of all others. The disease is chronic. Moreover, rebuke is unbearable. They "were offended, after they heard this saying." They are offended still. Nothing offends more quickly or deeply or unpardonably than the exposure of a false religion; and, strange contradiction, the more false and foolish, the greater the tenacity with which it is held!

Thank God, the written Word, when received by lowly faith, makes all plain; but as to the proud teachers of a tradition that is contrascriptural, "Let them alone," says the Lord. They have made their bed; they must lie in the same.

"Ephraim is joined to idols: let him alone." Hos. 4:17.

"Joined to idols"-not merely idolatrous, bad as that may be, but definitely joined to them in a fearful and daring unity. Recovery appears hopeless. A long course of tampering with evil has not only blunted the conscience, but turned the evil into a pleasure; and every sense of what is due to God is dulled, so that the idols assert their authority, and God is forsaken. Alas, that the heart should thus become entrapped, Satan so easily conquer, and man fall so completely! Yet so it is; and when Ephraim is thus joined hopelessly and willingly to idols, the only, but terrible, sentence is "Let him alone." He must be left to the governmental ways of God. The ministry of man must not now interfere. He has chosen his course, and selected his path, and he must rue his folly. A man's way is his reward. What he sows he reaps. The object of his worship gives form to his life and character-to his future. Such is the nature of God's government, and therefore He said, as to idol-ruined Ephraim, "Let him alone."

To be let alone by God is the most awful condition in which man can find himself. Ten thousand times better to be emptied from vessel to vessel, like Job, than allowed to drift down the stream, like Ephraim. Better to feel the weight of God's hand in chastening-for it is a Father's hand-than exist under a sense of His averted countenance.

Thank God there is grace as well as government, and His desire is that His people should "continue in the grace of God."

What a wide difference between the let alone that was passed on the conduct of Mary, and that passed on Ephraim; between the "let her alone" of divine approval, and the "let him alone" of divine displeasure; between the shield of heavenly shelter and the sentence of holy condemnation.

Dear reader, may you know and enjoy the first for your own comfort, and for the joy and glory of the blessed Lord who died and rose in order to give us a place at His feet, as the happy, blood-bought worshipers of a Savior who knows how to appreciate the smallest oblation that love can bring.

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