

John - Commentaries by H. R.

Christian Truth: Volume 33, Simon Peter, The History of: Part 6 - the Soul Restored (21:1-14)

John 21:1-14

We have in this passage some instruction with regard to the service and food of the Lord's servants, which we will examine in detail.

After Peter's many experiences, it would seem as if he were henceforth qualified for service. He went forth, followed by six other disciples, to fish in the Sea of Tiberias. What characterized this undertaking was that Peter himself took the initiative of setting to work to obtain the results of his labor. It was in vain, and the night waned before he and his companions had seen their efforts crowned with any success. Peter employed the same means as on a corresponding occasion, previous to his conversion. How often when God entrusts us with active service we set about it like men in the flesh, and our work is barren. It is important to understand that in ministry all, absolutely all, must be of God, and nothing of man.

The scene changed as soon as Jesus stood on the shore; His presence ushered in the dawn of a day of blessing. His presence was what was most needed. As long as they had toiled without Him, their efforts were fruitless. It was daybreak when this scene took place. There is a special moment determined of God for service, and the disciples, unmindful of it, had lost their time during the whole night. They found the fish at the right side of the ship, in a special place only known to Jesus, and Peter had to trust to this knowledge before his activity could be crowned with success. The disciples cast their net at His word, having nothing else to depend on, and they captured one hundred and fifty-three great fishes; their fishing in this place closed with a number determined and known only by the Lord. From this moment, they had something else to do; they brought the result of their labor to Jesus (v. 10). From this point on, they did not fish for themselves or others, but for the Lord alone.

O that our hearts, dear servants of Christ, might all learn this lesson! When, where, with whom, by whom, and for whom, are we working? Does our life consist of one long night of human activity directed by the will of man? or is it like an aurora illuminated by the Lord's presence? and do we see our nets filled because we work in dependence on Him?

As to the food, Jesus stood on the shore and said, "Children, have ye any meat? They answered Him, No." Doubtless they thought that this stranger, whom they had not yet recognized, was in need of food. But the question forced them to avow that until now all their labor had given nothing to Christ. Then came the words, "Cast the net." It was as if He said to them, "If ye would give Me something, you must receive it from Me." From that moment John, the disciple whom Jesus loved, could no longer be mistaken; for to him the Lord was one who gave, and to whom nothing was given.

Here another point comes out; the disciples themselves had nothing to eat. Labor does not nourish; it causes hunger. Even fruitful labor, a miraculous catch of fish, left the disciples a prey to hunger. How many souls there are in the present day of activity who remain barren, in spite of their work, because they delude themselves as to the profit accruing to their spiritual life from their activity! It was not on the sea amidst all the surrounding effort and agitation, but on the shore where all was still that the disciples heard the Lord saying unto them, "Come and dine." The meal was not prepared with fish taken from their net, but provided by the Lord Himself, who distributed it to them. They fed on the result of Christ's work-what He alone had done for them.

May it be so with us, beloved. When we have brought the result of our service to the Lord that He may do as He thinks best with it, let us sit down, invited by Him to feed on Him in the retirement of the shore. Let us return not only for others, but above all for ourselves, to the holy Word which reveals Christ. Peter was led on a step farther in his service, and enabled to feed the lambs and sheep of the Lord.

The Soul Restored

John 21:15-19

"Lovest thou Me more than these?" Peter had said that he loved Him more, and yet had denied Him. The Lord takes him, so to speak, by the hand, and leads him back to the spot whence his fall had originated-confidence in his own strength and in his love for Christ. Three times during the Savior's last interviews with His disciples before He suffered, Peter clearly manifested his state of soul. "Though all men shall be offended because of Thee, yet will I never be offended." Matt. 26:33. "Lord, I am ready to go with Thee, both into prison, and to death." Luke 22:33. And "Lord, why cannot I follow Thee now? I will lay down my life for Thy sake." John 13:37. The Lord takes up these three words, beginning with the first, "Though all men shall be offended." "Lovest thou Me more than these?" All, alas! had forsaken Him, but Peter only had denied Him, and can therefore no longer rely on his love compared to that of others. Thus humbled, he appeals not to his feelings, but to the Savior's knowledge. He knew. "Yea, Lord; Thou knowest that I love Thee." He does not add "more than these"; for he compares himself with Christ, and in humility he esteems others better than himself.

Then Jesus said to him, "Feed My lambs" (J.N.D. Trans.). Pastoral care for young souls springs from humility, together with love for the Lord. Where the Lord finds these things in His people, He can trust them with His service. Other gifts are perhaps not so absolutely connected with the inner state; but one cannot really take up the needs of tender souls without self-abnegation and much love, not only for them, but for Christ.

"Feed My lambs." This one word shows us what they are for Jesus, and the value of what the Lord entrusts to Peter. They are His property. The heart of Christ had not changed in regard to Simon, and He entrusted him with what He loved as soon as his first step was taken in the painful pathway leading to restoration. Peter's heart was broken, but sustained by Christ in the breaking. Jesus did not probe it three times to give him an answer only at the third; He gave it already at the first. What delicate affection and care in the discipline! If the three questions had been put without the encouragement of a promise with each, Peter's heart, distressed by his failure, would have been overwhelmed with sorrow; but the promise sustained him each time under the stroke intended to break him down. It was like the burning bush, which grace prevented from being consumed. Jesus probed Peter three times; he had denied Jesus three times. The last time nothing remained but what the Lord had produced and could approve. Sorrow was there too, no doubt, but joined to the certainty that the love which was the fruit of His love, though buried to the eyes of all by manifestations of the flesh, the all-seeing eye of Christ was alone able to discern. "Lord, Thou knowest all things; Thou knowest that I love Thee." After the second and third questions, the care of the sheep and the feeding of the whole flock was confided to Peter. It was when, through grace, he had seen himself, and been obliged to appeal to the Lord to discover what he gave up discovering in himself-it was then that he found himself possessed of full and unreserved blessing.

Christian Truth: Volume 36, Sepulchre, The (20:1-18)

John 20:1-18

A few women and the beloved disciple, John, were present when the Lord died. Before bowing His head and yielding up His spirit, the Lord uttered the words, "It is finished." They conveyed an infinite scope of blessing to the hearts of the disciples who were thus assured that divine love had taken pity on their state, and had provided for it at all cost. "It is finished." His work left nothing more to be done. The cross could no longer hold its victim and Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus were chosen of God to give the Savior a place with the rich in His death.

The visit of His dear followers to the sepulcher proved to their hearts the truth of His words, "It is finished." What did the sepulcher contain? What had death done with the Savior? Or, What had the Savior done with death? If the grave held Him, His work was vain, and not one of those for whom He had given Himself was acquitted or justified. Mary found the sepulcher open. Peter and John ascertained that it was empty. Peter went in and saw. The attributes of death were there, testifying by their presence that death had been unable to hold its prey, and that, without struggle or conflict, the victory over it had been peaceful. The napkin was wrapped together in a place by itself, as one does with a garment when preparing to go out. The "It is finished" was proved. The love which had undertaken the work had completed it, and the disciples, who as yet knew not the scripture, were convinced by the testimony of their eyes. They believed, and went away again unto their own home with the knowledge of a work thenceforth completed.

Two disciples saw and believed, but they found little in comparison to what a poor, ignorant woman found at the sepulcher. Mary Magdalene, a witness of the love of Christ (for He had delivered her from the seven devils), loved the Lord with an affection which sprang from the greatness of His love and which far exceeded her intelligence. While the intelligence of Peter and John could be engaged and satisfied with a work, Mary's affection could not be; she needed more; she needed the Person who was her Object. Peter had gone into the sepulcher and had seen only the linen clothes and the napkin. As she wept, Mary stooped down and saw two angels in the sepulcher. While the linen clothes sufficed for the disciples, even angels were not enough for Mary. Even in their presence, and without awaiting their answer, she turned back, for she wanted her Lord. At first her utter ignorance of what was happening hindered her from recognizing Him, but when Jesus, the good Shepherd called her by name, "Mary," she immediately recognized and responded to the Shepherd's voice.

There was a link of affection from Jesus to Mary and from Mary to Jesus. Is Mary's affection surprising when we think of the Savior who in the perfection of His Person had made her, a failing, ignorant creature, the object of His goodness and delivered her from her bondage? The most wonderful thing is not Mary's affection for Jesus, but Jesus' affection for Mary. Among thousands of thousands He knew her by name as His sheep. He remembered her who had been the most wretched. She said unto Him, "Master." He replies, not, "Go to My servants," but, "Go to My brethren, and say unto them, I ascend unto My Father, and your Father; and to My God, and your God."

Mary's affection in clinging to Christ caused her to receive a revelation greater than all those which Peter had received up to this point. Love which is set on His Person becomes the depository of further knowledge. Knowing only His work, the disciples went away again to their own home. Mary Magdalene, with love which clung to His Person, learned at the Savior's feet the most glorious results of His sacrifice. This weak woman, in all the modesty of her position, outshines the disciples. Their feet were swift, no doubt, to lead them to the sepulcher but Mary was the first to know the path which leads straight to the Father, and, retracing her steps with this marvelous revelation, to carry the message to the disciples.

Christian Truth: Volume 33, Simon Peter, The History of: Part 4 - Washing of Feet and Communion (13:1-17)

A fresh aspect of the character of Christ and His work is revealed to Peter at the supper-His service in connection with communion. On the holy mount Peter had been brought into the actual scene of this communion, and had heard the Father's expression of delight in His Son; but he had to learn what was necessary in order to enjoy this communion, or maintain it, or be restored to it if it had been lost. We may, like the disciple in Matt. 17, enjoy some measure of intercourse with God without real communion with Him. Communion is being in thought and heart, one with the Father and the Son. The Lord explains it in our chapter when He says to Peter, "If I wash thee not, thou hast no part with Me." v. 8. Have we part with Christ unreservedly in His estimate of things, His thoughts and affections? Have we God's judgment concerning man, the world, sin? Have we His thoughts as to the work of Christ and the value of His blood? Have we the same affections as the Son for the Father, and the Father for the Son-common enjoyment with God as to the perfection of Christ, common thoughts with the Son concerning the Father to glorify Him, to please Him, to do His will, to trust in Him, to enjoy to the full His presence?

Alas! when it comes to realizing these things we are indeed forced to own that we know but little of such communion; for in reality the moments spent in heavenly communion are, as it were, submerged in the rest of our Christian life. And yet there is nothing to hinder its being continual; for we have the eternal life which brings us into it. (1 John 1.) But if our communion is so feeble, let us not be content with our measure of it; and on the other hand let us not be discouraged. God has made provision for all our failures and short-comings in the advocacy of Christ, and by washing of the feet, which is the counterpart.

The basis of the service is the love which has been manifested once, but not exhausted, at the cross; for it remains, and will remain, the same to the end. "Having loved His own which were in the world, He loved them unto the end." John 13:1. It was not enough for the Lord to save us; His love would purify us from all defilement; and it is for this that He takes the place of a servant. Nothing can stop or hinder this service for His own. He girds Himself to wash the disciples' feet at the very moment of Judas' betrayal of Him (13:2). The possession of all things, His own dignity as coming from God and going to God, do not deter Him from this service; on the contrary, He makes use of His power in humbling Himself to serve His beloved ones. Such is His love manifested in the washing of the feet.

In connection with communion we find in this chapter the Advocate coming in to cleanse us. When Jesus says later on to Peter, "I have prayed for thee, that thy faith fail not" (Luke 22:32), it is advocacy in exercise with the Father for the disciple's restoration. The Lord's act in washing the disciples' feet is a lovely demonstration of how He would now place us in contact with the Word (the water of purification) which He applies Himself by the Spirit to our consciences concerning our walk, in order to give us not a future, but a present part with Him. "If I wash thee not, thou hast no part with Me." This is what we see with many blessed details in the type of the red heifer (Numb. 19)

But Peter as yet understood nothing of Christ's service so presented to him, and was unable to enter into what would thereby have been his part. Two things were lacking, expressed in these two words: "What I do thou knowest not now; but thou shalt know hereafter" (v. 7), and "Whither I go, thou canst not follow Me now; but thou shalt follow Me afterward." v. 36. These two things were knowledge and power.

Peter had real affection for the Lord; but this affection could not preserve him from the gravest of falls. He lacked what was indispensable—knowledge—as was proved in the hitherto most striking acts of his life. When he said (Matt. 16:22), "Be it far from Thee, Lord: this shall not be unto Thee," it was his affection which spoke; and yet at this very moment Peter, as an instrument of Satan, for want of knowing the heart of Christ, dared to think that the God of love would consent to save Himself. When on the mount he said, "Let us make here three tabernacles; one for Thee, and one for Moses, and one for Elias," it was again his affection for Jesus; but the knowledge of the glory of His Person was sadly lacking, although with his eyes he beheld the manifestation of it. He put divine grace on a level with the "law" which "came by Moses" to condemn, and prophecy which announced judgment.

In the scene of the tribute money (Matt. 17:24-27), Peter's "Yes," in answer to the question, "Doth not your Master pay?" denotes once more affection for his Master whom he thought to honor in the presence of his compatriots, but without the least knowledge of the dignity of Him who was God, Creator, Lord of the temple, Son of the Sovereign on His throne.

In the chapter before us, Peter's words, "Thou shalt never wash my feet," denote again his affection, joined to a sense of the dignity of Christ, but also ignorant of the Savior's love, which found its satisfaction in devoted service. Then when the Lord says to him, "If I wash thee not, thou hast no part with Me," he asks to have not only his feet washed, but also his hands and his head. Truly this was affection for Christ, for he esteemed it most precious to have part with Him; but this affection was accompanied by complete ignorance of the work which had already accomplished purification once for all. (I say "accomplished" because from chapter 13 to the end of 17 the Lord is seen as if on the other side of the cross, His hour being come to depart out of this world to the Father.)

The secret of our intercourse with our brethren is also found in this knowledge of the work and the love of Christ. As the Lord had loved them (v. 34), the disciples were to love one another; as He had washed their feet, they were to wash one another's feet (v. 14). And here let us observe in passing, that when we are in need ourselves of feet washing in order to be restored, it is not the moment for us to attempt to wash our brethren's feet. The man himself must be clean who would sprinkle the water of purification on one who had been defiled by a dead body (Numb. 19). If we lack vigilance in our walk, we lose not only the communion consequent upon it, but the great privilege of service toward others.

As we said before, the second thing which Peter lacked was power. Humanly speaking he was characterized by an energy which led him to face difficulties, but which, being energy of the flesh, did not enable him to overcome them. "I will follow Thee." "I will lay down my life for Thy sake." "I will not forsake Thee." Such is his usual language. It was always affection, but without divine power, and an affection which did not hinder the disciple from denying his Master. What was lacking was the power of the Spirit, which is exactly contrary to that of the flesh, and which is only displayed in the measure in which the flesh is judged. For its full manifestation there must be the sense of utter powerlessness in oneself.

Peter could not have either this knowledge or power previous to the death and resurrection of Christ, or before the gift of the Holy Spirit; but what he had to pass through when he was not yet in possession of these two things was profitable to him, and is, and will be so, to others. In The Acts of the Apostles, Peter's career completely changes. Knowledge of Christ, power, self-forgetfulness, blessed service for others, are met with at every step. Old things are passed away, and we have the new career of a new man.

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