

## Jesus, the Son of God

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John 1: 29-43

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The great truth that underlies the Gospel of John is the Godhead of that Man who was thus walking on the earth. I do not mean merely in its explicit statement of Him, but in that which implies it constantly, as is ever more wonderful to him that attentively weighs the word of God. Thus His divine glory comes out in the most indirect ways and unexpected forms; hence souls grow in strength by that infinite display of love — Jesus nowhere more truly God than when a man. He was indeed a man: but this was little or nothing in itself, unless He were God. Then what a truth and what a love! What humiliation on His part! What infinite blessing to man, at least to the souls who believe! The Word was made flesh, but He was the true God; and hence it is that we find, whenever He speaks or acts, by whatever the Spirit of God traces Him, Godhead is there behind the veil.

John the Baptist's testimony here has quite a different character in itself and another effect on the soul from what we find in the other Gospels. Where else does he treat of Him as the Lamb of God? The Messiah, the coming King, the perfect Servant engaged in the work of God, the woman's Seed and Son of man — these we do find elsewhere; but here we have Him as the Lamb of God in a far more comprehensive relation than with the old and favoured people. He is the Lamb of God who taketh away the sin of the world. Thus it is that He is presented in a universality of blessing through His work that could not be in any one but a divine person. Certain it is that He is shown here habitually in this character. "This is the Son of God."

Hence it is that in the Gospel of John it is not a question of the dispensations that disappear or succeed one another, but of what is vital and unchanging because divine. Hence, too, therefore, it is when dispensations have passed away that the full meaning of such a word as this is realised. It is not particularly now, nor in the age that follows, but in the eternal state, that it will be manifest that He is the Lamb of God who taketh away (not our sins as believers but) sin in its totality. We know how it is usually quoted for a sense altogether different. It is not really to meet that which we are found in and forgiven by faith in His blood, but when the world shall be clean rid of it all. Sin will be banished wholly from the universe. What a testimony to His glory, who by His work effects it all! I refer to this prevalent error the more plainly and pointedly, because souls may be suffering under the influence of this too common confusion in things which so materially differ. It is not a question of the saint on earth in whom the Spirit of God dwells. The error helps on the delusion of Satan, not alas! outside, but in Christendom. There is the subtlest snare for man. It is Babylon.

What is Babylon? Is it not the cage of every unclean bird and beast? What havoc is not there, particularly of the truth? God has been most of all dishonoured there. It may be, as in the present case, by only one letter, but that makes all the difference between truth and error. All Christendom then says or sings, Christ is the Lamb of God which taketh away the sins of the world. How blinding is worldly religion!

Can we not now register our growth in the truth by the words we used to say ignorantly, but dare not repeat now at all? They are positively false. Indeed I know scarcely a more injurious error than this if logically carried out. Christ is "the Lamb of God which takes away the sin," not the sins, "of the world." One is a blessed truth, the other is a mistake with the gravest consequences. It is to enfeeble or

destroy the peace of the believer, and to pillow unbelievers with hopes that work ruin to themselves, with dishonour to God and His Christ.

Nor do I believe that any bodies in Christendom have contributed to this error so much as those who boast of their liturgies. Remission of sins for faith is an integral part of the gospel, which supposes that the sins of unbelievers, far from being taken away or forgiven, will be the more sternly judged because of unbelief in Christ.

But this verse, misinterpreted as we have seen, has helped on the errors of Christendom from sub-apostolic days. It was among the delusions which gave impulse to the departure that undermined the gospel of God; nor am I aware of a single Protestant Confession which has cleared itself from perpetuating this error, though they differ widely enough otherwise.

The dissenters too, who stand for extemporaneous prayer, are no better. If you went into a place where there is no prayer-book, you would find the self-same doctrine, and the same misuse of this very Scripture. So ingrained is the error that, if you stated the truth, they would affirm that it was a distinction without a difference. Thus everywhere the truth of God is entirely set aside for tradition, which is man's thought, and subversive always of God's truth.

The only party that succeeds in a compromise is Satan's synagogue. Where souls in the forms of prayer are habitually fed with such an error as this, it is vain for the pulpit to assert the truth opposed. The heart prefers error to truth, for the truth exalts God and humbles man. And Satan is striving to lower the person of Christ, to Whom that word testifies. Hence it is, no matter what you take up, though it were a "Life of Christ," the uniform tendency is to dishonour Him, and in the same proportion to blot out the real difference between believers and unbelievers in relation to Him. There may be every kind of reverent language and pious desires, but it will never suffice for God without the truth, that is, Christ. Error puts all down on the same level, but this gives, in vain, everything to the world, as it takes away every distinctive blessing from the believer. They humanise Christ and they deify man as he is.

How full and refreshing the testimony of God-Christ as His Lamb taking away the sin of the world in due time; the same is He which baptiseth with the Holy Ghost (vers. 29, 33)! They are the two works of the Lord Jesus, in the words of John the Baptist — His great earthly and His great heavenly work. We must not confound the bearing of our sins in His own body on the tree with taking away the sin of the world, as He will, for the new heavens and the new earth, When it is a question of sin-bearing, it is "our" sins (1 Peter 2); when it is a question of taking away, it is the world's sin. This is the ultimate effect of His work. The Spirit looks onward by John in the full sense of what Christ was eventually to accomplish, an immense work in connection with His divine glory. He "appeared for the putting away of sin" by the sacrifice of Himself. Hebrews 9 speaks of His purpose to put sin away. It is not the time when it was to be done, but the end for which He appeared. The work was effected on the cross; but the full results of the cross are not yet manifested.

John bare record with another declaration — that he knew Him not. It was not to be in anything human. Of course the heavenly work needed a divine person. It is even more distinct, for who could give the Spirit thus? None but God could take away the sin of the world; and John knew Him not, though he came baptising in view of His manifestation to Israel. So also now there is an equally great heavenly work which He wrought at Pentecost, the effect of which still goes on. He Himself never was to be baptised by the Holy Ghost, which signifies the bringing entirely out of one position into another.

Quite another thing is said of Him. "Upon whom thou shalt see the Spirit descending and remaining on Him, the same is He which baptiseth with the Holy Ghost." We are said to receive the Holy Spirit of God, and to be "sealed unto the day of redemption." A believer is sealed now by the

Spirit; an unbeliever at all times needs to be quickened. Were the unbeliever sealed, it would be woe to him; it would fix him (if it could be) in his state of ruin. "In whom after that ye believed ye were sealed." It is not a question of what the interval may be. It might be long or short. But no man is sealed the very instant he believes. First, there is the Spirit of God bringing him to judge himself and his sins before God. Thus is the soul born of God; he believes the gospel and finds peace. Men were cleansed by the word, or born of the Spirit, before the gospel. In reality it is the word by the quickening energy of the Spirit revealing Christ that effects this. The word brings home God's judgment of sins now, instead of by and by. Hence it is mischievous to date a soul's conversion or quickening from the day when it receives peace or is made happy.

It is of the deepest consequence to bring souls to repentance, as much really as to bring them into peace. People talk often of having peace with God long before they know what it means. They may have joy before. There may be a bright revelation to the soul through Christ which they are apt to call peace; but for solid peace the soul must have found its all in the work of Christ, entering by faith into God's mind about itself and Him. Consequently it can rest only in that full redemption of the Lord Jesus. Then the Holy Ghost seals. There can be no sealing until Christ and His work are thus rested on. The two things are distinct — to be born of the Spirit of God, and to be sealed on the ground of Christ's redemption. When the soul has submitted to the righteousness of God, the Spirit seals it.

But our Gospel is bringing us into the truth of Christ's person, as applied to whatever the Holy Ghost traces it here. He was not baptised by the Spirit, but He baptised others by the Holy Spirit. "Upon whom thou shalt see the Spirit," etc. There was an entirely special glory in our Lord's case. The Spirit was as the dove, not, as on the day of Pentecost, the rushing wind, or the tongue of fire.

Yet was Jesus man, and joined those who confessed their sins and were baptised with water. But at the very moment the heavens opened and the Father's voice was heard, and the Holy Ghost descended on Him, but no baptism of the Spirit for Him, no power needed to bring Him out of the position in which He was to a new and better one. It was as on a man that the Holy Ghost came down, on Christ without blood; no sacrifice did He need, no offering for sin, for in Him was none. Yet it is the believer that most of all confesses, what he is and what he, has done, and the Holy Ghost not only descends, not only abides, as on Christ, but now baptises believers into one body. It is divine power that puts us in entirely new associations in and with Christ. But the body is not the only great truth of God. It would be wrong to state that the baptism of the Holy Ghost effects it *alone*. The unity in John is very different from that of Paul. It is never the unity of the body, but that which is of Christ in us. Being thus formed by the Spirit of God, it has the character of deeper intimacy, and is rather family unity, giving communion of mind, feeling, and purpose. We have had the work of Christ on earth in respect to sin; before the work of redemption there could not be baptism of the Holy Ghost. The work must be laid as a basis which would glorify God, and is to take away the world's sin. Now this work is done, and we can be thus baptised.

But many are quite incredulous. They hold that the Old Testament saints were just as much thus baptised; only we have better knowledge and can judge of everything, and so on. This is not the only error. They are doctrines that flow from a low estimate, if not of Christ, certainly of His work, and consequently there is no thorough judgment of sin or the world. Doubtless some would be disposed to talk of "peculiar views." How little have such souls been exercised by the word of God? We used, when denominationalists, to have peculiar views; we are getting rid of them now through the Lord's mercy.

The testimony of His work now follows the declaration of His person. So the two disciples heard

John speak, and followed Jesus. But we fail to see the force of this, unless we see who it was that gave the testimony. According to the Lord Jesus Himself, of all that are born of women, none was greater than His messenger, John the Baptist. Yet the effect of it is that the disciples leave him for Jesus. "Behold the Lamb of God" had sunk into their hearts. Now we see this blessed result: they followed Jesus.

Here comes out the glory of the person of Christ. If He had not been God, what a slight it would have been to have given up John the Baptist! John was the greatest of God's servants; but he says, "He must increase, but I must decrease." God was there in "the man Christ Jesus." This truth abides still, and we see it open out a little, when "Andrew findeth Simon, and he brought him to Jesus" (ver. 42).

Now I want to show that there is another truth of the highest possible importance taught in all this. God is not merely saving souls, but gathering to Jesus. Do we want to know what He is gathering-for and what to? It is to Jesus. One was there, God, that was not only from the beginning, but who looked right on to the end. There may be other things to intervene, but once we find this immense landmark, what a change! Jesus is not merely a Saviour but a centre, and this is what the Spirit here brings before us. There is nothing else to give us both firmness and humility. It communicates a deep sense of what God has at first done, and is still doing : for we are simply recovering what God has laid down in His word. It is what has long since slipped out of mind in Christendom.

This further truth I would now press on those that are here. It is not enough to have salvation, still less to have life in Him, and forgiveness through His blood. God also gives us Christ as His one central Object for gathering together. His love to us, His glory, would not be satisfied with conferring blessings on us. He makes Christ to be the one adequate and abiding centre for the saints on earth. If He had not been God, it would have been a derogation from His own honour. But as He is God equally with the Father, to own Him thus is the Father's joy. In all things the blessed Servant of God, that Man alone was God, and in Him we find the true centre.

But the knowledge of Christ as the Lamb of God precedes this, as we see here. Then God puts this desire into our hearts. The Destroyer of the works of the devil, the Deliverer from sin, attracts our hearts and we go forth to Him (Compare Heb. 13: 13). No person or polity, doctrine or creed, is worthy of such a place. It is due to Christ from all that are His. It is not a question of a centre by and by in heaven. Scripture shows us the value of Him now as the divinely-given centre on earth. So in Matt. 18: 20, He says, "Where two or three are gathered together unto my name, there am I in the midst of them." What a joy to have Him thus! We shall ever be around Him in heaven; but why defraud Him and our own souls of the privilege, not to say bounden duty, of the same principle now, and on earth? It is His holy and unquestionable will about us; and we dishonour Him if we do not gather to Him here below.

Let me refer you to other scriptures that prove the importance of it, as Matt. 12: 30. "He that is not with Me is against Me; and he that gathereth not with Me, scattereth abroad." The believer is called to take his stand for and with Christ, and to make Him his one and continual centre for gathering souls to. It goes far beyond the fact that one believes "for he that gathereth not with Me, scattereth." The first is for myself, the second is for my work; and in both respects Christ is all. He is my Lord and Saviour, He is also my centre, and, in whatever way seen, He is, in all His divine perfection, the needed and the given One; and, as His own, God works that we should be gathered to Him and gather. There may be seductions and trials, and these not on one side merely, but on all sides. There may be fair appearances, efforts after union if not unity, and success may be claimed where Christ is not the centre. There may be sorrow and shame where He is thus acknowledged, sometimes wrong done and sometimes a right thing in a wrong way. We are not to be moved on the one hand, nor to be insensible on the other. For

where God's centre is owned in faith it is in general a question of grace and patience, though possibly at times a question of judgment, but all these things turn in the long run to Christ's glory, and then what joy for those who wait in faith!

Thus Christ as the centre for saints on earth becomes of the deepest practical moment. There may be all kinds of centres, but, whatever they be, they are rivals. Every one but Himself is repudiated by God's word, and really it would be an unworthy centre for His people were we to substitute for Himself anything in the Bible — say the highest truth — His body, the church. For that very reason you would have, not only a spurious centre, which has wrought infinite mischief, as we see in Catholicism, Romanism, etc.; but besides, the very narrowest of all narrow parties; you would merely have those that understand the church of God! A similar result would follow if the Lord's coming became the central object and test for gathering to. We have been speaking today of the Lord's coming, and the very souls who need most the loving gracious care of Christ are the very persons who would then be rigidly shut out, for how little is their intelligence in this or anything else!

Where Christ is held to truly as the centre, it will be found that the affections freely flow towards all that He loves. If you have the true centre, can it be doubted that you will find yourself with the true circumference? It is His name by faith in it which alone gathers according to God, and those who answer to it are welcome to Him, and should be to us. Hence also it appears to me quite a mistake to set forth the church or its principles as the remedy for the present distractions of God's children, but to set souls right with Christ. I have never met a Christian who simply and fully entered into the liberty of Christ without also finding out the value of Christ as the true centre for saints. Let them only know Christ better and His redemption, and then follows the heart's decision to cleave to Him in every way. On the other hand, I have known many, familiarly learning the church, the Lord's coming, and other grand truths, who nevertheless remain in their old human associations. If we all owned the same person, work, and centre in Christ, we should all circle in harmony around Him.

But it is, alas! far from the fact; and men cleave each to their systems, which thus, whatever they may argue, become a rivalry of Christ. Nor should one wish to hurry any soul. Those who hear and refuse Christ as a centre should be left with the Lord. I have known those who seemed even spiritually-minded to turn out quite unsound in faith, so that, if you had only known, you would have thanked God for keeping such away. If then you are content with Christ as the centre, gather you with Him, and He will approve it when He comes again.

But if you are not gathering with Him, what forfeits? Oh, what scattering! oh, what an utter collapse of zeal and labour! Can you deny that His word warned you? Which is the case with you? To what centre are you really gathering? Have you the "open door" and Christ inside, Christ in the midst? Are you looking and labouring in the Spirit to that centre? He is worthy, He alone.

But there is another passage to be noticed. briefly, in Mark 9: 40, "He that is not against us, is on our part." Here it is a question of largeness of heart in what is wrought, and not of the paramount claims of Christ personally. Hence it is no longer "me" but "us" and "on our part." "And John answered him, saying, Master, we saw one casting out demons in thy name, and he followeth not us: and we forbid him, because he followeth not us. But Jesus said, Forbid him not: for there is no man which shall do a miracle in my name, that can lightly speak evil of me. For he that is not against us, is on our part." The danger. is here of narrowness in service, not of speaking against the Son of man and the Holy Spirit. The faithful should appreciate true service wherever it is, but can only gather with Christ. We have to bear this in mind. There is such a thing as, work done in the name of the Lord Jesus, which is not done within the circle that is formed round the true centre. And what have we to do? Meddling as

little as possible we should heartily own whatever is done in His name, but cleave to Himself as our security as well as our joy and boast.

You may see often a servant of Christ in a false position yet blessed to others largely. Do you envy it? Or would you depreciate the work done? The Lord answers to the faith in His name without the least endorsing what even we regard with deep regret. Be content yourself to keep His word and not deny His name. Do not forget the distinction between the sovereignty of Christ's grace and the Christian's fidelity to His person. I can understand an unhappy man always murmuring; but those brought into the richest blessing may well rejoice like Paul, in Phil. 1. But do not confound largeness with laxity. Of all things under the sun there is, in a saint, nothing worse than looseness; but the more right we are by grace, the more we can afford to be gracious. Cleaving to Christ then, let us watch against the narrowness that is only occupied with our own things. If in Matthew we have Christ against Satan, in Mark, on the other hand, we have the place we should give to a servant, even if not with us. The Lord Jesus did not, could not, say as regards Himself what He says about His service. Compare Luke 9: 5 for the one and Luke 11: 23 for the other. The Gospel of Luke is pre-eminently full of great moral principles.

It is not then that we pretend to have what God does not give to all His children. But we want them to see all that Christ is to His own even on earth, as well as for them in their sins. We seek no party, and I dare say a big party is but a bigger evil. But there is only one thing which truly preserves from every snare to the glory of God, and that is Christ. Let Him then be the object of our souls. May we be kept by the Spirit in all subjection unto His blessed name.

Nor is it only that we have the divine centre in Christ, in order to be thus kept from building up something that has to be taken down when He comes, but we are in the midst of dangers, and snares, and evil. How are we to be kept from these? By Jesus, the same yesterday, today, and for ever. The same divine person provides for all the difficulties of every day. He is the light of life, as well as the centre for our zeal and labour. Every word of God is precious and profitable, as every scripture is inspired of Him; but we need to read Christ in it to reap the full value: and for this we may count on the Spirit of God who is here to glorify Christ.

I do not believe that the word of God, apart from Christ, ever does suffice for His purpose or our blessing. The word written is meant to associate with Christ, and not to dispense with Him. God has given us His word. So He says to Philip, "Follow me" (ver. 43). He is "the way," as well as "the truth," and "the life." How blessedly we have Himself set out in God's word! If a person is in difficulty and a situation opens out for him, he might think it providential. but he is required to do certain things he knows to be wrong. Is he then to follow Christ or evil? The voice of Jesus is heard, "Follow Me." Thus in our whole path by His grace we have the same Christ that engages our affections and service. Is Christ, then your object? He is the HOLY, the TRUE; and those that hear His voice will cleave to Him. Christ who is the constant spring of blessing, is the safeguard of every saint in this world of vain show.

The Lord then, is "the way" as He expressly says of Himself in John 14, as truly as He is the attractive centre; and we need Him quite as much for our way now on earth. Are we competent to pass safely through this wilderness where there is no way? Only by cleaving to Christ as "the way." It is a great thing to work to Him, as well as from Him, and for Him; but there is no adequate, no absolute, preservation from slips and deviations on our part, or from the misleadings of others, let them be ever so wise in the main, save by following Jesus. He only is the way. We have to "beware of men"; we do well to try by the word what saints say and do, but we may, we ought to, unreservedly follow this divine and divinely given way — our Lord Jesus. It was not needed in the paradise of man unfallen ; it

will not be in the paradise of God, where all will be according to His will and glory in unfailing goodness, and no seducer intrude more, no weakness or lack of vigilance expose on our part. But whether we look at what is without, or bear in mind what our nature is within, we do deeply need a sure path through the world, away above its motives and maxims and habits and objects. And here we have the One God delights in, even Christ, not only as the Lamb of God, and the centre, by grace and truth, for the saints, but as the way to follow through all snares and difficulties and dangers. Who that knows would fear to follow Him? May we learn to know Him better as the only way! "If any man serve me, let him follow me: and where I am there shall also my servant be: if any man serve me, him will my Father honour."

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