

1 John - Commentaries by John Alfred Trench

Scripture Truth: Volume 1, Knowledge of the Father, The (2:13)

J. A. Trench

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And now we are face to face with what led me to take up the subject. What is this knowledge of the Father to which the youngest child in Christ has his inalienable title? And if he has this title, is it yours and mine actually to enjoy it in all its inestimable privilege? It is clearly something more than knowing that we are children of God; though our hearts may well be deeply touched as we behold the manner of the love bestowed upon us, that we should bear this name and be able to take up the children's place before the Father, as born of Him, and possessing the Spirit of His Son (Chapter 3:1).

The relationship is one thing; the knowledge of the Father whose child I am is another. Suppose the case of natural relationship, and the difference will at once be perceived: the relationship remains the same whatever the character of the parent, but for the children how much depends on it — he may be loving and considerate, or very much the reverse: the difference to them is incalculable. Is it enough, then, for us to know that by infinite grace we are the children of God, or shall we not seek to know our Father? Ought we not to earnestly desire to become familiar with the thoughts and feelings of His heart, the love of His nature, His character (if I may use the word in the deepest reverence), when He makes this knowledge of Himself the privilege of the youngest child of His? But it may be asked, how am I to know Him? It can only be as He reveals Himself. Let us then humbly seek the way Scripture presents this blessed revelation to us.

Matthew 11 will naturally come before us as the first intimation of such revelation in the ministry of the Lord Jesus. All the circumstances make it the more affecting for our hearts. It was a time of deep trial and testing for Him. Hard-hearted unbelief met Him in the cities wherein most of His mighty works were done, and these works attested who He was in whose presence they were so unmoved. But it only served to bring out in the perfection of the blessed Lord, what the knowledge of the Father was to Him. He knew whence to receive all that pressed so heavily upon Him, for we read, "at that time Jesus answered and said, I thank Thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because Thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes."

In His rejection by these cities He owned nothing but His Father's ways of perfect wisdom and love. If in divine wisdom these things were hid from the wise and prudent, there were babes to whom they would be revealed by infinite grace. He knew the love of the Father, and in this He found His perfect resting-place, and submitted Himself absolutely to His will: this is clearly expressed in the words "Even so, Father for so it seemed good in Thy sight." These two things come before us, then, in the experience of the blessed Lord: the source of His rest in the knowledge of the Father, and His perfect submission to the Father's will: into both He would introduce us; for this is the connection of the words that follow, too often missed. In verse 27 all the deeper glories of His Person, of the place given to Him, and His work in the deepest character of it come before Him. Not only the Messianic Kingdom, but "all things" in universal supremacy are delivered unto Him by the Father: the unfathomable glory of His Person is made known in the words "no man knoweth the Son but the Father": and then as the most

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If it now becomes an anxious question, to whom will He reveal the Father whom only the Son had seen and known, the answer comes at once in the precious words, “Come unto Me all ye that labor and are heavy-laden and I will give you rest.” How many there are that have been through the world, and with all their toil and weariness have found it void of anything to satisfy. He had been through it and found it to be such, but He had a secret source of perfect rest. He calls us to Him that He might reveal it to us. This source of rest is the Father, and His heart of infinite love. The Son would give us rest by revealing Him, and then we have only to learn of Him, the meek and lowly One, how to submit ourselves absolutely to His will to find this perfect rest realized practically under all circumstances. Both have been seen in practical operation in the blessed place the Lord took as expressed in “Even so, Father, for so it seemed good in Thy sight”; and it is when faith finds its sure title to trace all that comes upon us to the Father’s heart, that the yoke of submission is easy, and His burden light. How blessed, then, the confirmation that to know the Father is not some advanced experience that only belongs to those who have been long in the Christian way, when we find that it is the first thing before the Lord as needed to give rest, and to establish the heart that trusted Him, in view of the consequences of His rejection and the changes of dispensation involved by it, as the remainder of this gospel opens them out. But for the full development of all that flows from the divine glory of His Person, that has just been touched here and then dropped, as not within the scope of Matthew, we must turn to the Gospel of John, where from the outset it shines out everywhere, though veiled in the lowly form of Manhood.

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The Word, who was in nature God, became flesh and tabernacled amongst us, so that the opened eye of faith beholds His glory, the glory as of an only-begotten with a Father — the one cherished object of the Father's delight (John 1:14). This it is that gives His blessed competency to make the Father known; even as we read in verse 18, "No man hath seen God at any time, the only begotten Son which is in the bosom of the Father He hath declared Him." Who so fitted to make Him known as the Son who dwells in His bosom? For His nearness and intimacy of relationship with the Father ever characterized Him while speaking and acting as Man amongst men. Let us then seek to follow out how the revelation of the Father comes to us in the person of the Son. It is in His words and works as grouped together by the Spirit in the Gospel of John we shall find it. Here alone, in all Scripture, the Father is fully revealed: one reason, doubtless, why the little flock turns to it instinctively as their richest pasture.

Mark the way He is presented to us in John 5:17-20: it becomes a revelation to us of the place the Son had taken, and which He ever kept in His pathway here. In refusing the possibility of a Sabbath for the heart of God in a world of sin and sorrow, Jesus says, "My Father worketh hitherto and I work." If the time for the rest of God was not yet, the full time of His work had come, that men might be fitted to have their place in that rest. The Jews were right in taking the words of the Lord as involving His equality with the Father, but for that reason it could not be true that He made Himself God. The truth was that, being in the form of God, He thought it not a matter of usurpation of that which did not belong to Him to be equal with God, but emptied Himself (for that is the wonderful word) and took upon Him the form of a servant and became in the likeness of men; and even then being found in fashion as a man He humbled Himself (Phil. 2:6-8.) Emptying Himself as God, He humbled Himself as man, instead of making Himself anything.

He was not here then to act as God, independently, for He said, "Verily, verily, I say unto you, the Son can do nothing from Himself, but what He seeth the Father do." He had come only to act in absolute dependence upon the Father; yet none but He who was equal with the Father could have said, "What things soever He doeth these also doeth the Son likewise." But it was as acting from His conscious place in the Father's love and in perfect communion with Him, "for the Father loveth the Son and showeth Him all things that Himself doeth." All His works were thus the Father's works, the expression of the Father's nature and will as flowing from this divine communion. In His works the Father was revealed. Hence His solemn words in John 10:37, 38, "If I do not the works of My Father believe Me not. But if I do, though ye believe not Me, believe the works: that ye may know, and believe, that the Father is in Me, and I in Him."

Nor was it otherwise with His words, as John 12:49-50 wonderfully shows: "I have not spoken from Myself; but the Father which sent Me, He gave Me a commandment, what I should say, and what I should speak... whatsoever I speak therefore, even as the Father said unto Me so I speak." What new and precious interest His whole path is invested with, when we learn that in words and works alike He is expressing the Father, that we might be brought to know Him as thus perfectly revealed. From this, too, flows the revelation of the Father's house, never before spoken of in Scripture.

The Father's House and the Way

John 14, where all comes out fully, commands our deepest attention. For there we find that when the Lord Jesus could no longer take His place with His own in a world that rejected Him, He would give them a place with Himself in the Father's house where He was going: "In My Father's house are many mansions: if it were not so I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for

you, I will come again, and receive you unto Myself; that where I am there ye may be also. And whither I go ye know, and the way ye know." Two things then He expects them to have conscious knowledge of — the Father's house, as the place where He was going, and the way. But how could this be so when the Scriptures had been silent on such themes?

Thomas asks as to the way and learns that Jesus spoke of the way to the Father, for the revelation of the Father was the revelation of the Father's house, the way to the Father was the way to the Father's house. Jesus was Himself "the way," "for no man cometh unto the Father but by Me." He was also "the truth," for God being revealed they had the truth as to everything, which consists in its relation to Him: and then further He was "the life," the blessed capacity to enjoy the revelation. And He adds, "If ye had known Me, ye should have known [conscious knowledge, Rev. Text] My Father also: from henceforth ye know Him, and have seen Him."

Philip would know more of the place, for he seemed to seize the thought that the Person makes the place, that the Father constitutes all the joy and blessedness of the Father's house, hence his prayer, "show us the Father and it sufficeth us." How blessed by grace to have the consciousness that nothing else is needed to fill and satisfy the whole being. How far do we enter into anything of this sense of things, now that all is fully out? But the answer lies in what has been before us; and in words of gentle reproof Jesus says, "Have I been so long time with you and yet hast thou not known Me Philip? He that hath seen Me hath seen the Father, and how sayest thou then, Show us the Father?" And He appeals to His words and works, "Believest thou not that I am in the Father and the Father in Me? the words that I speak unto you I speak not from Myself, but the Father that dwelleth in Me He doeth the works. "And if the words were not sufficient — " believe me for the very works' sake" (ver. 11).

But Philip had not then the Spirit, as we have, to enable him to enter into the testimony of the words he heard and of the works he saw. What of ourselves, beloved brethren, how far — to ourselves again let us put it — how far have we profited by the revelation? — now that the Spirit has brought it to constant remembrance by the apostolic record, and, as dwelling in us. would give effect to the testimony in our souls, and be the power of our enjoyment of it to the full.

We Have Not Been Left Orphans

We all know how to feel for an orphaned child, with the capacity for the enjoyment of relationship, and yet without that which alone could draw out and fill and satisfy the affections and give the sense of home — a father and the love of a father's heart known and possessed: for the father's house is ever the home of the children. But we are not orphans, for we know the Father, and again it must be pressed that the knowledge of the Father implies more than merely the consciousness of relationship. There is the love of the Father, and the Lord would lead us into the blessed reality of it. See John 16:26-27: "At that day ye shall pray in My Name, and I say not unto you that I will ask the Father for you [for the words 'pray' and 'ask' ought to be thus reversed]: for the Father Himself loveth you because ye have loved Me, and have believed that I came out from God." What wealth and fullness of divine affection are here! The Father loves the Son, and if we love Him there is a bond between our hearts and His in a common object of love; and thus we are given the sense of being the objects directly of the Father's love.

Eternal Life

But there is what even goes beyond this, for in John 17 there is presented another character of the blessing that is connected with the revelation of the Father, namely, what eternal life is, the life we possess in the Son of God. It is, in its deepest character, "that they may know Thee [that is, the Father whom He was addressing] the only true God [not now to be known apart from the revelation of the Father] and Jesus Christ whom Thou has sent" — the way and One in whom He has been revealed. Eternal life had been in the Son with the Father from eternity (1 John 1:2) ever characterized by that relationship; it was manifested for the first time on earth by the incarnation, the Son revealing the Father in all His ways; now, based upon the work of redemption, which in this chapter is looked at as already accomplished by His death and resurrection, He introduces us into all the position and relationship of that life as set forth in the risen Christ. The position in which He here associates us with Himself in relationship with the Father, in absolute separation from the world, leading on to our yet future enjoyment of it in the proper sphere of that life, His heavenly glory and the Father's House, is the most complete setting forth of eternal life we have.

Then how beyond all the thoughts of men is the purpose of eternal love which finds expression in the words of this wonderful prayer. For Jesus speaks not only of the perfection of the given-glory of Christ in which He will manifest us to the world (John 17:22-23) "that the world may know that Thou hast sent Me and hast loved them as Thou hast loved Me;" but in the last verse He speaks of the way He has provided for our present enjoyment of such a place in the Father's love: "I have made known (a richer word than declare) unto them Thy name, and will make it known." The revelation of the Father's name in the Son by His words and works is perfect, as we have seen in this Gospel, and nothing can ever be added to it. But the blessed Lord assures us that He will make it known, so as to bring the power of the revelation into our hearts and lives now as an ever-increasing reality. And this in order "that the love wherewith Thou hast loved Me may be in them, and I in them." He Himself — oh, if we could only enter a little more into the marvelous thought! — to conduct the Father's love, as He knew it, and was the object of it, into our hearts — He Himself in us as life, to be our strength and capacity for knowing and enjoying it. If John 17 had not so revealed it we never could have conceived that the Father's love to us was of such a character, and that the place the Son had in it was the only measure of our place in it. We cannot grasp it, but we can believe and enjoy it and adore Him, and know something increasingly of living in the-consciousness of being loved by the Father as He loved the Son.

The Great Obstruction

One more thought for which we must turn back to the epistle. What is it that has so obstructed the realization of what has come out as the first and simplest yet deepest privilege of the youngest in God's family circle? I think it is not far to seek. We are brought to it when the next stage of growth is reached, and the "young men," who have met Satan coming openly against them, and, by the word of God abiding in them, have overcome him, have to be warned against the world. The subtle enemy of our souls knows how to work by that which is his sphere, and present some object in the world to allure the heart. For it is not what lies in our hands that is the chief danger, but that which he can incite us to desire. "Love not the world;" and it is added — to guard us against the treachery of the heart that would make "the world" be just that which lies outside the boundary of its own hopes and prospects and ambitions — "neither the things that are in the world." And there we learn that "if any man love the world the love of the Father is not in him." He does not speak of the love of God, which is shed

abroad in the heart as surely as the Holy Spirit has been given, which is assumed of all those to whom John writes. It is the love of the Father — the enjoyment of that special relationship, with all that flows from the knowledge of Him with whom we are in relationship — which is specifically hindered, if the heart goes out after any poor worldly object. Yet all that is in it morally — how well to know it from God — is “lust,” the desire to possess what we have not, or “pride” — the contemptible pride of what we have; and absolutely nothing else. What a cheat it is! Yet how many Christian lives, which once opened full of the brightest promise, have soon become clouded over, and closed in comparative darkness, as having become ensnared by it. “The world passeth away” — thank God we may well say, “and the lust thereof: but he that doeth the will of God abideth forever.” The Lord make that blessed will the one thing before our hearts, for the few remaining moments of testing, so that there may be true expansion and growth in the divine nature which we possess, by the power of the heavenly relationships we enjoy, and the knowledge of divine Persons with whom we are in relationship by infinite grace.

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When a man builds a house or a ship he takes heed that no beam be strained; so God never overtaxes our faith, He knows our frame. He is faithful and will not suffer the testing to be greater than the faith.

To be strong in faith two things are needful — a very low esteem of ourselves, and a very high esteem of Christ.

Humility promotes fellowship, pride produces division.

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