

1 John - Commentaries by R. Beacon

Bible Treasury: Volume N6, 1 John 1:1-4 (1:1-4)

It would be impossible in the entire compass of the New Testament to find a passage richer in vital truth, or characterized by greater sublimity than the opening verses of this Epistle. They treat of the very kernel of Christianity. The apostle speaks with equal ardor and reverence of "That which" (we note the extremely abstract way in which he writes—truly with no loss of force, but the contrary), of Him who was so precious to him. None was so fitted to proclaim this central verity as he who had "tarried" so long; into whose heart the truth must have sunk deeper and deeper with the years; who, full of love and the expression of it was nevertheless a stalwart soul, a "son of thunder," resolute to make no terms with heresy, even then budding all around. It is true he says little or nothing directly of the evil doctrines; he does what is infinitely better, and sets forth the truth as to Christ's Person in words most surely of the Holy Ghost's teaching, and this with a fullness and precision of which, I suppose, only that marvelous Greek tongue was capable. And so, from the pen of the latest apostle, we have a statement as accurate and concise as it is wonderful and profound. None can fathom these depths, truly the "deep things of God;" none would less have claimed to do so than the venerable saint whose high privilege it was to record these striking words for the comfort and edification of believers until the end.

"That which was from the beginning" —as one has said, although there is plainly an allusion to that past eternity when the Son of God was, yet both the occasion and the context point to the Incarnation. That assuredly is the "beginning" referred to here. It was the more necessary to enforce this cardinal truth that a serious heresy was afloat fathered by an Alexandrian Jew named Cerinthus, who maintained that the Christ did not descend upon Jesus till His baptism and that He departed from the Savior before the crucifixion. This was one of the many forms of bad doctrine that are summed up under the name of Gnosticism; it was of an intellectual character, whereas magic and even immorality played their dishonorable part in some of the developments of the system. The enemy of souls, then as now, had baits to suit all temperaments. No doubt all the types of error were not equally gross, though all were opposed utterly to the truth, being in fact the result of the working of the philosophic minds invariably furthest astray. And so John insists on the great truth that the Christ is Jesus, and that "from the beginning." This is in fact the burden of the Epistle. In the Gospel the same essential truth is presented from the converse stand-point. "These (things, signs, &c.) are written that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ." It is the historic aspect; Jesus when presented to man, is declared to be the Christ, to be Emmanuel, God with us. Here the believer rests, incurious to dissect what must ever baffle human ingenuity. The human and the divine are indissolubly blended. Well might Athanasius say, in reference to this most sublime of mysteries, "So much we know; the cherubim veil the rest with their wings." Yet learned men continue feverishly to analyze and discuss, often with disastrous consequences to themselves and others. Doubtless such laborious effort is not confined to the Scriptures; the serious thing is that such methods should be applied to God's word; for after all, if men deny the existence of Homer, they may be wrong in so doing and probably are—yet the regret is one of sentiment only. How otherwise with God's revelation!

But I want now to call attention to a difference of tense in the original that is lost in the A.V., but which the R.V. (as also J.N.D.'s) gives with as much fidelity to the Greek as English is susceptible of. We must recollect that Greek is a very wonderful language, capable of expressing the most minute variations of meaning. Here, however, the distinction is sufficiently obvious when pointed out. It is this. The apostle says (ver. 1), "which we have heard, which we have seen." Then he adds, "which we looked upon, and our hands handled." Observe the absence of 'have' in these two clauses. It is no idle change. In the 'have' clauses John is enforcing results, so to speak. He means that at the time of writing he and his brother apostles heard and saw, because they had heard and seen. Then he is carried back to the past, to those "sinless years," as the poet says, "that breathed beneath the Syrian blue," and he lovingly tells of what he had been privileged to enjoy when his Lord was on earth. That is the force of the different tenses¹ as every scholar knows. Thus we have first his insistence on that which abides (ἀκηκόαμεν, and ἑώρακάμεν); and then he confirms it all by telling of the past. In short, we have first a statement of doctrine, then one of history.

Again, "We have seen with our eyes" (ἑώρακάμεν) is the sight that results in knowledge; but the words "we looked upon" (ἑθεασάμεθα) imply gazing on with rapt contemplation, as one has said. How perfectly suited each word is to its office must be abundantly clear to the intelligent believer. Talk of the perfection of classical authors! It is nothing compared with that of God's word—at least the incomparably greater importance of the latter throws into stronger relief the nicety of the diction.

But there is more. In verse 2 we have a combination of both methods; "for," says the apostle, "the life was manifested" in the historic past (ἐφανερώθη), and then there is more doctrinal insistence, and again he says, "we have seen it." Another interesting distinction is, that the word occurring in vers. 2 and 3, and rendered 'show' and 'declare' in these verses respectively (so fond were the excellent Revisers of King James's day of varying their rendering of the same Greek term, in accordance with H.M.'s suggestion, some say,) is different from the word also rendered 'declare' in verse 5. They are both compounds of the same simple verb. But in verses 2 and 3 the word implies 'declaring on the authority of another.' How admirably chosen the term is, in such a context, is most evident. But the suitability is no less apparent in verse 5 (beyond the scope of these remarks, which were to be limited to verses 1-4), for there solemn asseveration is implied. The first verb is ἀπαγγέλλομεν, the second (in ver. 5) is ἀναγγέλλομεν.

Lastly—in verse 3 we have again what I have ventured to call the doctrinal insistence, "we have seen," "we have heard," —the order of ver. 1 being reversed. How striking that the apostle should refer to the abiding knowledge, gained by seeing,² three times in three verses! For three times he says, ἑώρακάμεν, ("we have seen"). Repetition is either idle or momentous, a sign either of a feeble writer, or of colossal strength. If the apostle once only tells of the rapt adoring gaze, his triple insistence on the absoluteness of his knowledge is the more significant. This must suffice for an attempt to furnish further light to the English reader on one of the most treasured passages in the N.T. If such close scrutiny appeals specially to the scholar, the truth enshrined must delight every simple Christian.

R.B.

Bible Treasury: Volume N9, 1 John 2:6 (2:6)

"He that saith he abideth in him ought himself also so to walk even as he walked." The italicized pronoun is in the original Greek a word of vivid force. The English reader naturally is unaware of any special emphasis. But it is there, and that in a marked degree. Several times indeed John uses it in this Epistle in reference to our Lord. And it has been beautifully observed by the late Archbishop Alexander that the thought of his Lord, and of the perfect life which he himself had portrayed in the Fourth Gospel, the scroll of which, may be, was beside him as he wrote, half hushes the apostle's voice, and so instead of mentioning the revered name, which all who loved it would easily supply, he consequently merely says "that One" (ἐκεῖνος), that great, that adorable One. This comment is as just and well-warranted as it is exquisitely beautiful.

"He that says he abides in him." Have we not here in brief the concentrated doctrine of John 15:1-7? And then the tense in which the apostle refers to the Savior's walk sums it all up, as it were. It is the aorist (περιπάτησε), and presents that spotless life as a perfect whole. Contrariwise, and most appropriately, in the admonition to the professor he enforces the necessity of ever walking as He walked. In short it is the present infinitive, περιπατεῖν.

What endless beauties, "lights and perfections" (may one not say?) are to be found by the reverent student of the holy word!

R. B.

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