

John - Commentaries by William Woldridge Fereday

Our Lord's Miracles and Parables, John 5:2-15: The Pool of Bethesda

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WHAT the law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh, God, sending His own Son—"No one need misunderstand these words of the apostle, transcribed from Romans 8:3. They declare unequivocally the powerlessness of the law to help ruined man, and the supreme necessity for the mission of the Son of God. These principles are strikingly exemplified in the case of the infirm man who was healed by the Saviour at the pool of Bethesda (John 5).

The porches of the pool were invariably crowded with sick folk, for it appears that from time to time an angel troubled its waters, which then gave healing to the first person that stepped in. This, while a merciful interposition on the part of God, and beneficial to those possessed of some strength, was manifestly of no avail whatever for persons absolutely helpless. The pool is thus remarkably typical of the law, which promises life and righteousness to those who keep it in all its parts, but which has nothing but condemnation and death for those who fail to keep it (Gal. 3:10-12). Now, seeing that man is utterly evil in root and branch, and so "without strength" it is manifest that the law can never yield him blessing. Scripture says truly "the law is the strength of sin" and "the law worketh wrath" (1 Cor. 15:56; Rom. 4:15).

The Saviour observed a man at Bethesda who had been afflicted thirty-eight years, just the period of Israel's unnecessary wandering in the wilderness as the fruit of putting themselves under law (Deut. 2:14). Hoping against hope, the poor fellow had long watched the pool, having no thought in his mind that healing could ever come to him by any other means. Sadly like the multitude in Christendom to-day, whose only thought concerning salvation is that it must be obtained by human effort, if it is to be obtained at all. And this after the full revelation of God's grace in Christ!

To the Saviour's inquiry, "Wilt thou be made whole?" the impotent man replied: "Sir, I have no man, when the water is troubled, to put me into the pool; but, while I am coming, another steppeth down before me." A truly extraordinary reply, seeing that the pool was not mentioned in the question. He must now learn that what the pool could never accomplish for such as he, the Son of God could accomplish instantly by His word. At the command of Omnipotence, "Rise, take up thy bed and walk," he arose, took up his bed, and departed to his house. In like manner all the need of the soul is now met by the Saviour's word, apart from works of any kind whatsoever. "Verily, verily, I say unto you, he that heareth My word and believeth on Him that sent Me, hath everlasting life, and shall not come into judgment, but is passed from death unto life" (John 5:24). His atoning death and triumphant resurrection explain how He is able to offer such simple terms to the ruined children of men.

Had heart and conscience been lively in Israel, there would have been national humiliation before God concerning Bethesda's suffering throng. Such was the special character of Israel's calling that suffering and disease would have been unknown amongst them had they continued faithful to Jehovah (Deut. 28). But to everything divine the people, and especially their religious leaders, were utterly insensible. Instead of appreciating the Saviour's goodness they persecuted Him for healing on the Sabbath day. Such is religion without God.

Our Lord's Miracles and Parables, John 4:46-54: The Courtier's Son

THE Lord was again in Galilee, having returned from Jerusalem through Samaria. During His stay in the metropolis He had expounded the way of life to Nicodemus, and on His journey homeward He had ministered eternal satisfaction and joy to the woman by the well of Sychar. The latter incident was followed by two days of happy labor amongst Samaritans deeply eager to hear His word.

He was once more in Cana. A nobleman, resident in Capernaum, appealed to Him to visit that port and heal his son, who was now at the point of death (John 4:46-54). The story is interesting in all its parts, for the present and future history of Israel may be read therein. The man was a courtier, or "King's officer" (R.V. margin); i.e., he was, though a Jew, attached to the court of Herod, the alien ruler of the northern districts of Israel. Expressive picture of the false position in which the elect nation has long stood. Having proved false to its unique calling in separation from all other peoples, God has abandoned the nation to the fruit of its ways, with the result that Israel has been for ages subservient to Gentile masters. Like the courtier's son, Israel has fallen under the power of death, so that nationally the people are likened in Ezekiel 37. to a valley full of dry bones, no more to live until the day of the Saviour's presence here in power. In answer to His suppliant, the Lord replied: "Except ye see signs and wonders ye will not believe." In Israel generally this was only too true (1 Cor. 1:22), while with Samaritans and Gentiles His word sufficed. With fervor the father besought Him: "Sir, come down, ere my child die." His faith was far below that of the Roman centurion under similar circumstances. He urged the Saviour not to come, but to speak the healing word where He was, being persuaded that nothing more was required (Matt. 8:8). The Jewish courtier must be taught his lesson; accordingly he was dismissed with the words: "Go thy way, thy son liveth." He believed the Saviour; for his faith, though feeble, was real. He therefore turned his steps homeward, soon meeting servants who had been sent out from Capernaum with the happy intelligence that his son was well. Upon inquiry he learned that the fever left him at the very hour of the Saviour's utterance in Cana. From that moment his whole household became believers in the Messianic title of Jesus of Nazareth.

Faith in the word of the absent Christ is the great need of the present time. No longer is His voice heard speaking on earth, but He speaks from heaven in the sacred Scriptures. Therein He tells us of the infinite love of God, of the costly sacrifice of Calvary, and of pardon, justification and eternal life, the blessed portion of all who trust in Him. If the divine voice is not to be heard in the Scriptures then is heaven absolutely silent, and we are left to blindly grope our way along towards destruction. He who imagines that the Creator has thus abandoned His creatures, plagues his own heart with unreasonable thoughts concerning Him Who is both infinitely wise and infinitely good.

IT will be noticed that John, in his history of the Saviour, pursues a line altogether different from the other evangelists. The reason of this is that while Matthew, Mark and Luke present the Lord to us in various human characters—as Messiah, Servant, and Son of Man, John sets forth His essential Deity. In the course of his exposition of this marvelous theme, he gives us a set of seven miracles, rightly called in the Revised Version “Signs.” Four of them were performed in Galilee and three in Judea.

The first of these signs was wrought in Cana, soon after the Saviour emerged from the retirement of Nazareth, and before His first visit to Jerusalem as a Prophet. He had been invited with His disciples to a wedding feast, His mother being there also (John 2:1-11). Unlike His herald, John the Baptist, our Lord was no ascetic (Luke 7:33-34). He was the most accessible and gracious of men. Marriage is a divine institution; He would signify His respect for it by His presence at its celebration when called. In a world of evil, marriage is an immense moral safeguard for men, and is “honorable in all” (Heb. 13:4). “Forbidding to marry” is one of the predicted marks of the apostasy (1 Tim. 4:3). Amongst the notable first preachers of Christianity Paul seems to have been the only unmarried man. Peter and the other apostles took their wives with them on their missionary journeys (1 Cor. 9:5).

The wine ran out at Cana. Mary drew the Lord’s attention to the fact, evidently prompting Him to perform a miracle. It is noteworthy that He immediately rebuffed her. Only on two occasions do we find Mary intruding herself into the Lord’s matters of service, and on each occasion He set her aside. (Compare Matthew 12:46-50; John 2:3-4). Intensely devoted to her though He was as son to mother, He would not stiffer a merely natural relationship to influence the course of sacred things. All who reverence the Scriptures will see in these records a warning given beforehand against the superstitious blunder, now widely prevalent, of attributing intercessory and mediatorial powers to Mary.

The feast-chamber at Cana was furnished with water-pots, but even they were empty, sadly suggestive of the emptiness of all earthly joy and delight. At the Saviour’s word the pots were filled with water, which became instantly transformed into wine of such excellent quality as to draw forth high praise from the master of the feast. “Every man at the beginning loth set forth good wine; and when men have well drunk, then that which is worse: but thou hast kept the good wine until now.” What Christ gives is necessarily superior to anything this world can afford. We are hereby reminded in a typical way of the pure joy with which even earth will be filled in the day of Christ’s Kingdom. When He who now sits upon the Father’s throne is established upon His own throne in Zion, all earth’s woes will be brought to an end. He will fill the whole scene with peace and blessing.

Meanwhile the wine is suggestive of the profound truth that all blessing for men, whether now or in “the world to come” is founded upon redeeming blood. For the Saviour ere He went on high appointed a cup of wine as the abiding memorial of His own most precious blood (Matt. 26:27).

Our Lord's Miracles and Parables, John 21:3-8: The Post-Resurrection Haul

THIS was the last miracle wrought by the Saviour before going on high. The cross and the grave were now behind Him. He had been delivered for our offenses, and raised again for our justification; nothing remained for Him now but to ascend up where He was before. Remarkably, John, the only one of the four evangelists who uses the word “ascend” in connection with our Lord, gives us no account of the ascension itself (John 3:13; 6:62; 20:17). Instead, he furnishes us with a series of three incidents, which seem expressly designed to show the varied results of the Saviour’s atoning work as regards this world. We have first, in the Lord’s manifestation of Himself to His disciples on the evening of the resurrection, a picture of the Church of God, now being gathered by the Holy Spirit to Christ as its Center; then we have, in His showing of Himself to doubting Thomas, an earnest of His future revelation of Himself to long-unbelieving Israel; and, finally, in the remarkable draft of fishes, we may see a picture of the great ingathering from all nations in the Millennial age. God’s order for blessing is thus, first, the Church; then, Israel; then, the world as such. (Let the reader carefully peruse John 20:19-21. 14.)

The fishing incident happened on this wise. The Lord had appointed His disciples (the men who were soon to evangelize the world) to meet Him in Galilee. On arrival there, instead of waiting for Him, they went fishing at the suggestion of Peter. This was disobedience. Their course is a vivid representation of the present condition of their nation; God’s chosen instruments for the world’s blessing, yet in obstinate disobedience to the divine will (Rom. 10:21). A whole night of toil yielded no result to the disciples. Even so will Israel one day confess “We have not wrought any deliverance in the earth” (Isa. 26:18). Now it has to be said to them: “The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles through you, as it is written (Rom. 2:24).

The Saviour came upon the scene as morning dawned. His presence changed everything for the discouraged fishermen. In reply to His inquiry they dismally acknowledged that they had nothing to eat (a picture of the present barrenness of disobedient Israel); then at His command they lowered the net on the right side of the boat, and forthwith enclosed 153 great fishes. “And for all there were so many, yet was not the net broken.” If the sea, which is here described by its Gentile name (Tiberias, after Tiberius Cæsar) represents the nations, as we believe, then we have in this haul a striking picture of the great universal in-gathering when Israel is once more in relationship with God (Psa. 67). This will not be until the Saviour’s feet again stand upon the Mount of Olives.

Every devout soul longs to see the world delivered and blessed. It has been the holy aspiration of the pious in all ages to see the earth filled with the knowledge of God. This yearning has its source in God Himself, and He will not disappoint it. Nevertheless, Christianity is not destined to bring about its happy realization. The world’s blessing hinges upon Israel’s blessing. When Israel turns to the Lord and resumes her high place as leader and teacher of the nations, universal good will follow speedily. Meanwhile, salvation is available for all—Jews and Gentiles alike—who put their trust in the Saviour Who died for their sins and rose again.

THE presence of Jesus in the midst of His saints is as real to-day, though He is glorified in heaven. We still have His word, "Where two or three are gathered together in (unto) My name, there am I in the midst of them" (Matt. 18:20). What a resource in a day of feebleness and failure! He has not changed towards His own. Though we look back, with humbled and bowed hearts, upon some eighteen hundred years of deepest failure, He is as true as ever to those who in simplicity of faith look up to Him. What a comfort! Whatever else we have not, we have Christ. Is He enough? Is it gift, wealth or influence, that we seek, or is it really Christ? I often think that the Lord had in view such a day as this when He spoke of two or three. There were no twos or threes in the first days of the church; all that believed were together. Men speaking perverse things had not arisen, nor had grievous wolves come into the flock to scatter and devour. But how changed is the condition of things now! Yet His word holds good to the very end. "Where two or three are gathered together unto My name, there am I in the midst of them."

What all our souls need, is a deeper realization of His presence. It would correct many things that we have to groan over before Him. Would saints arrive late on the first day of the week if there was a just sense that the Lord is there? To whom are we gathered? Whom do we go to meet? Dare I keep Him waiting? Who deigns to come into the midst of His gathered saints? Further, when together, what holy calm would prevail if His presence were duly realized! Nothing like haste or eagerness, and certainly no display of flesh would grieve us if all hearts realized sufficiently the simple, yet vital, fact that the Lord is there. It would enter into everything, affecting our dress, our words, our whole behavior. The Lord give us to exercise our hearts before Him.

Observe the place of separation of these disciples. They were shut in; the world—the murderous, Christ-rejecting world—was shut out. True there were special circumstances at that moment, but the principle abides. What has the church to do with the world? Where do we read of all the parish joining with the saints in "public worship?" Indeed, where is such an idea as "public worship" (or what is meant by the term) to be found in the word of God? We are called to bear testimony to the world, we are to preach the gospel to it, and warn men to flee from the wrath to come; but worship with the world! Far be the thought. In John 13:1 we read of "His own which were in the world." If we belong to the circle called "His own," of necessity we do not belong to the other "the world." The two are distinct and opposite in nature and character.

The Lord's first words to His disciples were, "Peace be unto you." How precious after the work which He had accomplished He had just returned from the battle, the enemy was overthrown, the work was done, divine justice was satisfied. Therefore He returns to those for whom He suffered, and announces the grand and blessed result. Not only so, but "when he had so said, he showed unto them his hands and his side." As if to say, "See how peace was made." He made it by the blood of His cross. Naught else would have availed.

When John saw the Lamb in glory, it was "a Lamb as it had been slain." The marks of Calvary will never be effaced from His holy person, though it is not true to say as Wesley, "Five bleeding wounds He bears." Whenever we gaze upon Him there (and shall we ever take our eyes off Him?), our hearts will be reminded of what it cost Him to redeem us to God.

But we have more in John 20 "Then said Jesus to them again, "Peace be unto you; as my Father hath sent me, even so send I you." Is this needless repetition? Nay, there is no such thing in scripture. The Lord is giving a commission in this verse, and in connection with it, says the second time, "Peace." He would have His own serve Him with the enjoyment of "peace" in their souls. How can one serve Him truly otherwise? What inward holy calm it gives to have the settled assurance that peace has been made and that it is ours; and further to have His peace keeping the heart and mind! The circumstances of service and testimony are often discouraging, and there is at times a tendency to give up; but His word comes in, "Peace be unto you," and the heart rests and is sustained.

The commission is blessed, yet solemn. As really as the Father sent the Son, the Son has sent His own unto the world. What a position for us! Taken out of the world, given to the Son, then sent into it to act for Him. The Son was here to make God known, and to bear witness to the truth; the same place is ours in measure. In reality it is a privilege to be allowed to spend a few years here before being taken to heaven. When first He called us to the knowledge of Himself, His purpose was to place us in the Father's house; and He could have done it there and then had it suited Him. But He has chosen to leave us here for a season, but it is to act for Him. We cannot bear testimony in heaven. All such service must be rendered here, and the more difficult and trying it is—the more suffering and reproach it brings—the more will it draw forth His approval and reward in the day that is at hand.

"And when he had said this, he breathed on them, and saith unto them, Receive ye the Holy Ghost." This passage may present serious difficulty to some. It was not yet the gift of the Holy Ghost as a divine person to dwell within them—for that they must wait until Jesus was glorified. We read in Acts 1:5, "ye shall be baptized with the Holy Ghost not many days hence," words uttered subsequently to those before us. To understand the Lord's action aright, we must go back to a similar one in Gen. 2. There we have the Lord God first forming the man's body of the dust of the ground, then breathing into his nostrils the breath of life. In this, man is distinguished from the beast. Here the Lord, risen from the dead, after having accomplished redemption, breathes His own risen life by the Holy Ghost into His beloved disciples. They were unquestionably converted men before; the Lord gives them now to participate with Himself in life more abundantly. It is of the utmost moment to seize that the life which is ours in Christ, is a risen life. What has judgment to do with it? What has law to say to it? It is victorious, and beyond the reach of the enemy. The difference between the Spirit as life, and His personal indwelling may be seen in Rom. 8. In vers. 1-11 it is not so much His personal presence as that He is the Spirit of life, instilling Himself into all our thoughts and ways, and giving character to the life that we now live below; in vers. 12-27 He is viewed rather as a distinct person dwelling within, bearing witness with our spirit, sympathizing with us in our groans and sorrows, and Himself making intercession for us according to God.

(To be continued, D.V.)

Jesus in the Midst, Jesus in the Midst: 1

IT is always deeply affecting to examine the closing chapters of the gospels, to ponder the sufferings, death, and resurrection of our Lord Jesus. Nothing tends more to draw out our affection, and bow our hearts in adoration before Him. He loved us and gave Himself for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweet-smelling savor, putting away, in that supreme moment, all our sins righteously from before God.

John 20 shows Him as risen. Death could not hold Him in its grasp. His work was done, death was annulled, God was glorified—the answer for Him being resurrection on the third day with a view to glory at the Father's right hand.

After giving us the details of His rising, the Spirit presents us in John's Gospel with four striking and instructive pictures; first, we have Him showing Himself again to the then believing Jewish remnant in the person of Mary, leading their hearts away from earthly hopes into relationship with Himself to the Father in the place to which he was going; secondly we see Him manifesting Himself to the assembled disciples, picturing the Christian assembly as gathered around Himself; thirdly, He makes Himself known to Thomas, removing all his doubts, in token of what He will yet do for Thomas's nation in a day yet to come; and finally at the sea of Tiberias, in the remarkable draft of fishes, a millennial picture is furnished of the ingathering of the Gentile nations for blessing.

It is the second of these pictures that I desire to draw attention to at this time. "Then the same day at evening, being the first day of the week, when the doors were shut, where the disciples were assembled for fear of the Jews, came Jesus and stood in the midst, and said unto them—Peace be unto you" (ver. 19). Here we have set forth in a remarkable manner the Christian assembly. But let not the reader misunderstand. However strikingly the assembled disciples, with the Lord in their midst, speak to us of the church, they were not the church of God at that time. The church had no existence as such, until Jesus was glorified and the Holy Ghost descended on the day of Pentecost. And even then the saved had no knowledge of it. Not until the apostle Paul was raised up, as one born out of due time, was the mystery of God unfolded. Therefore though these disciples in John 20 became the church of God, indeed its first members, they were not yet this in the day of which we speak. Still their position and privilege, especially the presence of the Lord in the midst, foreshadowed it in a very expressive way.

The Spirit is careful to tell us that it was the first day of the week when Jesus thus came and stood in the midst. The Lord thus puts His sanction, as it were, upon the assembly of His saints on that day. And what day more suitable? Of old it was the seventh day—the Sabbath—that was set apart for the worship of God. Let some suppose that the difference is but slight, but verbal, between the seventh day and the first. The difference is fundamentally important. The seventh day came in as the end of man's week of work; it was made an integral part of the law of Sinai, with solemn consequences attached to the breach of it. But the first of the week does not speak to us of man's work at all, but of a totally new order of things, brought in by God, founded upon the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus. It speaks to us of flesh set aside as worthless, of redemption accomplished, of righteousness completed, of a new creation, where all things are of God. Hence, Christians meet together on that day with triumph in their souls, to remember the Lord and to show forth His death, in the breaking of bread until He come.

It is quite the fashion to confound the two days, as if they were substantially the same, but the difference is immense. The one is Judaism and the other is Christianity. Alas! the return to Judaism with its worldly elements and feast days and sabbaths came in very early. One has only to read the Epistles to the Romans and to the Galatians to see how earnestly the apostle resisted the working of this leaven. But as the heavenly calling faded more and more from the minds of men, bearing the Lord's name, and the sense of divine grace too, Judaism made rapid strides, with the result that, to the mass, even in this day, the Christianity of the scriptures sounds strange doctrine in their ears.

Well, the Lord thus came into the midst of His own, on the first day of the week, the very day of His resurrection. If the Acts of the apostles and the Epistles be studied, it will be seen that this became the formal meeting-day of the assembly of God, whatever other opportunities they may have had of meeting together for mutual edification and blessing. In Acts 20:7 we read, "Upon the first day of the week, when the disciples came together to break bread, etc." This was the custom. They were not together to hear Paul, even though he was to leave them finally on the morrow, but to break bread. This scripture is even more forcible when rightly read: "When we came together." It was thus not a merely local custom at Troas, but the understood habit of the church of God in that day. It was on this day then that the Lord took His place in the midst of His own. What joy to them! Can we wonder that we read, "Then were the disciples glad when they saw the Lord." Is not His blessed presence heaven to our souls? What would the glory itself be apart from Christ? Suppose it were possible for us to be introduced even there and find no Christ, would it satisfy our hearts? Nay, better a hovel with Christ, than the very glory itself without Him. The renewed heart finds delight in Christ alone; our souls thrive in His blessed presence.

(To be continued, D.V.)

Our Lord's Miracles and Parables, John 11:1-45: The Raising of Lazarus

BETHANY was ever a sweet spot to the self-emptied Son of God. It was one of the few places on earth where He was loved, and where His wounded spirit found rest. Lazarus and his sisters constituted a delightful home circle. They loved each other, and they were one in their faith in the despised and rejected Messiah. Sickness invaded their home, for the wisdom of divine love does not always shield its objects from this visitation. Lazarus was laid low, to the deep distress of his devoted sisters (John 11.). The Lord was at that moment in retreat beyond Jordan. There the appeal reached Him: "Lord, behold he whom Thou lovest is sick." The sisters did not definitely ask Him to come to their aid, assuming apparently that the news would bring Him without delay. He could have healed the sick man from a distance by His word (as in the case of the centurion's servant), but He did not do so. Nor did He hasten to Bethany, but remained yet two days where He was. Were we not persuaded that such an One as He could never err, His conduct in this instance would amaze us. He was walking in the light, and saw perfectly the course He should pursue to the glory of God. Presently He announced to His disciples that Lazarus was dead, and that He was glad for their sakes He was not there, adding: "Nevertheless, let us go to him." Their warning that perhaps martyrdom awaited Him in Judea the Lord passed by without concern.

A stupendous miracle was to be performed. He had already restored two dead persons to life—Jairus' daughter, and the son of the widow of Nain. The one was just dead, and the other was on the way to burial. But Lazarus had been buried four days when the Saviour reached Bethany, and his body was already advanced in corruption. Martha met Him with the remark that if He had been on the spot her brother had not died. When He spoke of resurrection, she replied: "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day." She did not realize that she was addressing the Resurrection and the Life, Who has power to raise His own sleeping ones when He pleases, and to stay the march of death upon His living ones so that they will never die at all. With all the light given in the New Testament epistles since Martha's day few in Christendom are at this hour beyond her poor notion of a general resurrection at the last day.

Mary followed her sister to the feet of Jesus. Touched by the scene of grief the Saviour groaned and wept—precious proofs of the reality of His holy humanity. Coming to the tomb, the stone was removed at His word, spite of Martha's remonstrance. A few words of prayer to the Father were followed by the loud summons: "Lazarus, come forth," and soul and body were united once more. Liberty followed: "Loose him, and let him go." Wonderful outshining of the glory of God in Him whom men were about to crucify! Should not this marvel have convinced His adversaries of the futility of their designs against Him?

He is the Quickener of the dead. At the appointed hour He will raise His own for glory with Himself in the Father's house, and at the epoch of the dissolution of all things He will call forth His foes for the resurrection of judgment. Meanwhile He quickens men's souls. Those who heed His voice in the Gospel message pass even now from death unto life, and have the blissful assurance that into judgment they will never come (John 5:24-29). Life and liberty are the present blissful portion of all who believe in the name of the Only-Begotten Son of God.

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