

was not as yet a belief in which He could trust. Their mere intellectual witness to His claims He needed not; and their hearts untouched as yet, were, as He knew by Divine insight, cold and barren, treacherous and false.

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**LESSON EIGHT****CHAPTER XIV.****NICODEMUS.**

A CASTE or a sect may consist for the most part of haughty fanatics and obstinate bigots, but it will be strange indeed if there are to be found among them no exceptions to the general characteristics; strange if honesty, candour, sensibility are utterly dead among them all. Even among rulers, scribes, Pharisees, and wealthy members of the Sanhedrin, Christ found believers and followers. The earliest and most remarkable of these was Nicodemus, a rich man, a ruler, a Pharisee, and a member of the Sanhedrin.

A constitutional timidity is, however, observable in all which the Gospels tell us about Nicodemus; a timidity which could not be wholly overcome even by his honest desire to befriend and acknowledge One whom he knew to be a Prophet, even if he did not at once recognise in Him the promised Messiah. Thus the few words which he interposed to check the rash injustice of his colleagues are cautiously rested on a general principle, and betray no indication of his personal faith in the Galilæan whom his sect despised. And even when the power of Christ's love, manifested on the cross, had made the most timid disciples bold, Nicodemus does not come forward with his splendid gifts of affection until the example had been set by one of his own wealth, and rank, and station in society.

Such was the Rabbi who, with that mingled candour and fear of man which characterise all that we know of him, came indeed to Jesus, but came cautiously by night. He was anxious to know more of this young Galilæan prophet whom he was too honest not to recognise as a teacher come from God; but he thought himself too eminent a person among his sect to compromise his dignity, and possibly even his safety, by visiting Him in public.

Although he is alluded to in only a few touches, because of that high teaching which Jesus vouchsafed to him, yet the impression left upon us by his individuality is inimitably distinct, and wholly beyond

the range of invention. His very first remark shows the indirect character of his mind—his way of suggesting rather than stating what he wished—the half-patronising desire to ask, yet the half-shrinking reluctance to frame his question—the admission that Jesus had come “from God,” yet the hesitating implication that it was only as “a teacher,” and the suppressed inquiry, “What must I do?”

Our Lord saw deep into his heart, and avoiding all formalities or discussion of preliminaries, startles him at once with the solemn uncompromising address, “Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again (or ‘from above’), he cannot see the kingdom of God.” My disciple must be mine in heart and soul, or he is no disciple at all; the question is not of doing or not doing, but of *being*.

That answer startled Nicodemus into deep earnestness; but like the Jews in the last chapter (ii. 20), he either could not, or would not, grasp its full significance. He prefers to play, with a kind of querulous surprise, about the mere literal meaning of the words which he chooses to interpret in the most physical and unintelligible sense. Mere logomachy like this, Jesus did not pause to notice; He only sheds a fresh ray of light on the reiteration of his former warning. He spoke, not of the fleshly birth, but of that spiritual regeneration of which no man could predict the course or method, any more than they could tell the course of the night breeze that rose and fell and whispered fitfully outside the little tabernacle where they sat, but which must be a birth by water and by the Spirit—a purification, that is, and a renewal—an outward symbol and an inward grace—a death unto sin and a new birth unto righteousness.

Nicodemus could only answer by an expression of incredulous amazement. A Gentile might need, as it were, a new birth when admitted into the Jewish communion; but he—a son of Abraham, a Rabbi, a zealous keeper of the Law—could *he* need that new birth? How could such things be?

“Art thou *the* teacher (ὁ διδάσκαλος) of Israel,” asked our Lord, “and knowest not these things?” Art thou the third member of the Sanhedrin, the *châkâm* or wise man, and yet knowest not the earliest, simplest lesson of the initiation into the kingdom of heaven? If thy knowledge be thus carnal, thus limited—if thus thou stumblest on the threshold, how canst thou understand those deeper truths which He only who came down from Heaven can make known? The question was half sorrowful, half reproachful; but He proceeded to reveal to this Master

in Israel things greater and stranger than these ; even the salvation of man rendered possible by the sufferings and exaltation of the Son of Man ; the love of God manifested in sending His only-begotten Son, not to judge, but to save ; the deliverance for all through faith in Him ; the condemnation which must fall on those who wilfully reject the truths He came to teach.

These were indeed the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven—truths once undreamed of, but now fully revealed. And although they violated every prejudice, and overthrew every immediate hope of this aged inquirer—though to learn them he must unlearn the entire intellectual habits of his life and training—yet we know from the sequel that they must have sunk into his inmost soul. Doubtless in the further discussion of them the night deepened around them ; and in the memorable words about the light and the darkness with which the interview was closed, Jesus gently rebuked the fear of man which led this great Rabbi to seek the shelter of midnight for a deed which was not a deed of darkness needing to be concealed, but which was indeed a coming to the true and only Light.

Whatever lessons were uttered, or signs were done during the remainder of this First Passover, no further details are given us about them. Finding a stolid and insensate opposition, our Lord left Jerusalem, and went with His disciples “into Judæa,” apparently to the banks of the Jordan, for there St. John tells us that His disciples began to baptise. This baptism, a distant foreshadowing of the future \* sacrament, Christ seems rather to have permitted than to have directly organised. As yet it was the time of Preparation ; as yet the inauguration of His ministry had been, if we may be allowed the expression, of an isolated and tentative description. Theologians have sought for all kinds of subtle and profound explanations of this baptism by the disciples. Nothing, however, that has been suggested throws any further light upon the subject, and we can only believe that Jesus permitted for a time this simple and beautiful rite as a sign of discipleship, and as the national symbol of a desire for that lustration of the heart which was essential to all who would enter into the kingdom of heaven.

John the Baptist was still continuing his baptism of repentance. Here, too, theologians have discovered a deep and mysterious difficulty, and have entered into elaborate disquisitions on the relations between the baptism of Jesus and of John. Nothing of any value has been elicited from the discussion. Inasmuch as the full activity of Christ's

\* See Ed. Note on next page.

**\* Ed. Note:** I must object, here, to the term “sacrament” which the author has used several times. A “sacrament” suggests saving efficacy. Baptism is here the “sacrament” being spoken of. However, Baptism has no saving power of any kind. It is an “ordinance” which we carry out as an act of obedience, not a “sacrament” to somehow add to the saving power of Jesus Christ alone. See our required courses on Salvation, Baptism, and The Church, which are prerequisites to this current course.

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ministry had not yet begun, the baptism of St. John no less than that of the disciples must be still regarded as a symbol of repentance and purity. Nor will any one who is convinced that Repentance is "the younger brother of Innocence," and that for all who have sinned repentance is the very work of life, be surprised that the earliest preaching of Jesus as of John was—"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." The time of preparation, of preliminary testing, was not over yet; it was indeed drawing to a conclusion, and this baptism by the disciples was but a transitory phase of the opening ministry. And the fact that John no longer preached in the wilderness, or baptised at Bethany, but had found it desirable to leave the scene of his brief triumph and glory, marked that there was a waning in the brightness of that star of the Gospel dawn. The humble spirit of John—in all of whose words a deep undertone of sadness is traceable—accepted, in entire submissiveness to the will of God, the destiny of a brief and interrupted mission.

He had removed to Ænon, near Salim, a locality so wholly uncertain that it is impossible to arrive at any decision respecting it. Some still came to his baptism, though probably in diminished numbers, for a larger multitude now began to flock to the baptism of Christ's disciples. But the ignoble jealousy which could not darken the illuminated soul of the Forerunner, found a ready place in the hearts of his followers. How long it may have smouldered we do not know, but it was called into active display during the controversy excited by the fact that two great Teachers, of whom one had testified to the other as the promised Messiah, were baptising large multitudes of people although the Sanhedrin and all the appointed authorities of the nation had declared against their claims. Some Jew had annoyed the disciples of John with a dispute about purification, and they vented their perplexed and mortified feelings in a complaint to their great master: "Rabbi, He who was with thee beyond Jordan, to whom thou hast borne witness, lo *He* is baptising, and all men are coming to Him." The significant suppression of the name, the tone of irritation at what appeared to them an encroachment, the scarcely subdued resentment that any one should be a successful rival to him whose words had for a season so deeply stirred the hearts of men, are all apparent in this querulous address. And in the noble answer to it, all John's inherent greatness shone forth. He could not enter into rivalries, which would be a treachery against his deepest convictions, a falsification of his most solemn words. God was the

sole source of human gifts, and in His sight there can be no such thing as human greatness. He reminded them of his asseveration that he was *not* the Christ, but only His messenger; he was not the bridegroom, but the bridegroom's friend; and his heart was even now being gladdened by the bridegroom's voice. Henceforth he was content to decrease; content that his little light should be swallowed up in the boundless dawn. He was but an earthly messenger; but he had put the seal of his most intense conviction to the belief that God was true, and had given all things to His Son, and that through Him alone could eternal life be won.

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## CHAPTER XV.

### THE WOMAN OF SAMARIA.

THE Jew whose discussions had thus deeply moved the followers of John may well have been one of the prominent Pharisees; and our Lord soon became aware that they were watching His proceedings with an unfriendly eye. Their hostility to John was a still deeper hostility against Him, for the very reason that His teaching was already more successful. Perhaps in consequence of this determined rejection of the earliest steps of His teaching—perhaps also out of regard for the wounded feelings of John's followers—but most of all because at this very time the news reached Him that John had been seized by Herod Antipas and thrown into prison—Jesus left Judæa and again departed into Galilee. Being already in the north of Judæa, He chose the route which led through Samaria. The fanaticism of Jewish hatred, the fastidiousness of Jewish Pharisaism, which led His countrymen when travelling alone to avoid that route, could have no existence for Him, and were things rather to be discouraged than approved.

Starting early in the morning, to enjoy as many as possible of the cool hours for travelling, He stopped at length for rest and refreshment in the neighbourhood of Sychar, a city not far from the well in the fertile district which the partiality of the patriarch Jacob had bequeathed to his favourite son. The well, like all frequented wells in the East, was doubtless sheltered by a little alcove, in which were seats of stone.

It was the hour of noon, and weary as He was with the long journey, possibly also with the extreme heat, our Lord sat "thus" on the well. The expression in the original is most pathetically pic-

turesque. It implies that the Wayfarer was quite tired out, and in His exhaustion flung his limbs wearily on the seat, anxious if possible for complete repose. His disciples—probably the two pairs of brothers whom He had called among the earliest, and with them the friends Philip and Bartholomew—had left Him, to buy in the neighbouring city what was necessary for their wants; and hungry and thirsty, He who bore all our infirmities sat wearily awaiting them, when His solitude was broken by the approach of a woman. In a May noon in Palestine the heat may be indeed intense, but it is not too intense to admit of moving about; and this woman, either from accident, or, possibly, because she was in no good repute, and therefore would avoid the hour when the well would be thronged by all the women of the city, was coming to draw water. Her national enthusiasm and reverence for the great ancestor of her race, or perhaps the superior coolness and freshness of the water, may have been sufficient motive to induce her to seek this well, rather than any nearer fountain. Water in the East is not only a necessity, but a delicious luxury, and the natives of Palestine are connoisseurs as to its quality.

Jesus would have hailed her approach. The scene, indeed, in that rich green valley, with the great cornfields spreading far and wide, and the grateful shadows of trees, and the rounded masses of Ebal and Gerizim rising on either hand, might well have invited to lonely musing; and all the associations of that sacred spot—the story of Jacob, the neighbouring tomb of the princely Joseph, the memories of Joshua, and of Gideon, and the long line of Israelitish kings—would supply many a theme for such meditations. But the Lord was thirsty and fatigued, and having no means of reaching the cool water which glimmered deep below the well's mouth, He said to the woman, "Give me to drink."

Every one who has travelled in the East knows how glad and ready is the response to this request. The miserable Fellaah, even the rough Bedawy, seems to feel a positive pleasure in having it in his power to obey the command of his great prophet, and share with a thirsty traveller the priceless element. But so deadly was the hatred and rivalry between Jews and Samaritans, so entire the absence of all familiar intercourse between them, that the request only elicited from the woman of Samaria an expression of surprise that it should have been made.

Gently, and without a word of rebuke, our Lord tells her that had she known Him, and asked of Him, He would have given her living

water. She pointed to the well, a hundred feet deep. He had nothing to draw with: whence could He obtain this living water? And then, perhaps with a smile of incredulity and national pride, she asked if He were greater than their father Jacob, who had digged and drunk of that very well. And yet there must have been something which struck and overawed her in His words, for now she addresses Him by the title of respect which had been wanting in her first address.

Our Lord is not deterred by the hard literalism of her reply; He treats it as He had treated similar unimagi-native dulness in the learned Nicodemus, by still drawing her thoughts upward, if possible, to a higher region. She was thinking of common water, of which he who drinketh would thirst again; but the water He spake of was a fountain within the heart, which quenched all thirst for ever, and sprang up unto eternal life.

*She* becomes the suppliant now. He had asked her a little favour, which she had delayed, or half declined; he now offers her an eternal gift. She sees that she is in some great Presence, and begs for this living water, but again with the same unspiritual narrowness—she only begs for it that she might thirst no more, nor come there to draw.

But enough was done for the present to awake and to instruct this poor stranger, and abruptly breaking off this part of the conversation, Jesus bids her call her husband and return. All that was in His mind when He uttered this command we cannot tell; it may have been because the immemorial decorum of the East regarded it as unbecoming, if not positively wrong, for any man, and above all for a Rabbi, to hold conversation with a strange woman; it may have been also to break a stony heart, to awake a sleeping conscience. For she was forced to answer that she had no husband, and our Lord, in grave confirmation of her sad confession, unbared to her the secret of a loose and wanton life. She had had five husbands, and he whom she now had was not her husband.

She saw that a Prophet was before her, but from the facts of her own history—on which she is naturally anxious to linger as little as possible—her eager mind flies to the one great question which was daily agitated with such fierce passion between her race and that of Him to whom she spake, and which lay at the root of the savage animosity with which they treated each other. Chance had thrown her into the society of a great Teacher: was it not a good opportunity to settle for ever the immense discussion between Jews and Samaritans as to whether Jerusalem or Gerizim was the holy place of Palestine



—Jerusalem, where Solomon had built his temple; or Gerizim, the immemorial sanctuary, where Joshua had uttered the blessings, and where Abraham had been ready to offer up his son. Pointing to the summit of the mountain towering eight hundred feet above them, and crowned by the ruins of the ancient temple of Manasseh, which Hyrcanus had destroyed, she put her dubious question, “Our fathers worshipped in this mountain, and ye say that Jerusalem is the place where men ought to worship?”

Briefly, and merely by way of parenthesis, He resolved her immediate problem. As against the Samaritans, the Jews were unquestionably right. Jerusalem was the place which God had chosen; compared to the hybrid and defective worship of Samaria, Judaism was pure and true; but before and after touching on the earthly and temporal controversy, He uttered to her the mighty and memorable prophecy, that the hour was coming, yea, now was, when “neither in this mountain nor yet in Jerusalem” should true worshippers worship the Father, but in every place should worship Him in spirit and in truth.

She was deeply moved and touched; but how could she, at the mere chance word of an unknown stranger, give up the strong faith in which she and her fathers had been born and bred? With a sigh she referred the final settlement of this and of every question to the advent of the Messiah; and then He spake the simple, awful words—“I that speak unto thee am He.”

His birth had been first revealed by night to a few unknown and ignorant shepherds; the first full, clear announcement by Himself of His own Messiahship was made by a well-side in the weary noon to a single obscure Samaritan woman. And to this poor, sinful, ignorant stranger had been uttered words of immortal significance, to which all future ages would listen, as it were, with hushed breath and on their knees.

Who would have *invented*, who would have merely *imagined*, things so unlike the thoughts of man as these?

And here the conversation was interrupted, for the disciples—and among them he who writes the record—returned to their Master. Jacob’s well is dug on elevated ground, on a spur of Gerizim, and in a part of the plain unobstructed and unshaded by trees or buildings. From a distance in that clear air they had seen and had heard their Master in long and earnest conversation with a solitary figure. He a Jew, He a Rabbi, talking to “a woman,” and that woman a Samaritan, and that Samaritan a sinner! Yet they dared not suggest anything to Him; they dared not question Him. The sense of His

majesty, the love and the faith His very presence breathed, overshadowed all minor doubts or wondering curiosities.

Meanwhile the woman, forgetting even her water-pot in her impetuous amazement, had hurried to the city with her wondrous story. Here was One who had revealed to her the very secrets of her life. Was not this the Messiah?

The Samaritans—in all the Gospel notices of whom we detect something simpler and more open to conviction than in the Jews—instantly flocked out of the city at her words, and while they were seen approaching, the disciples urged our Lord to eat, for the hour of noon was now past, and He had had a weary walk. But all hunger had been satisfied in the exaltation of His ministry. “*I have food to eat,*” He said, “*which ye know not.*” Might they not have understood that, from childhood upwards, He had not lived by bread alone? But again we find the same dull, hard, stolid literalism. Their Scriptures, the very idiom in which they spoke, were full of vivid metaphors, yet they could hit on no deeper explanation of His meaning than that perhaps some one had brought Him something to eat. How hard must it have been for Him thus, at every turn, to find even in His chosen ones such a strange incapacity to see that material images were but the vehicles for deep spiritual thoughts. But there was no impatience in Him who was meek and lowly of heart. “*My meat,*” He said, “*is to do the will of Him that sent Me, and to finish His work.*” And then pointing to the inhabitants of Sichem, as they streamed to Him over the plain, He continued, “*You talk of there yet being four months to harvest. Look at these fields, white already for the spiritual harvest. Ye shall be the joyful reapers of the harvest which I thus have sown in toil and pain; but I, the sower, rejoice in the thought of that joy to come.*”

The personal intercourse with Christ convinced many of these Samaritans far more deeply than the narrative of the woman to whom He had first revealed Himself; and graciously acceding to their request that He would stay with them, He and His disciples abode there two days. Doubtless it was the teaching of those two days that had a vast share in the rich conversions of a few subsequent years.