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"LOVEST THOU ME MORE THAN THESE?"

- JOHN 21:1-25. - JUNE 14. -

Golden Text: – "Lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world." – Matt. 28:20.

QUITE a long interval elapsed between our Lord's appearance to the disciples on the eighth day (which was the sixth manifestation after his resurrection) and the one recorded in this lesson; it was about three weeks. During that interval we may be sure that our Lord was frequently with the apostles in spirit, watching over their interests. During that time the excitement incidental to his resurrection and six appearances within eight days wore off. Week after week they waited for further manifestations, and then concluded that something more practical should occupy their attention. Peter, because of his years and natural leadership, was the first to suggest a practical turn of affairs, saying, "I go a fishing" – I will return to the fishing business; what will you do? James and John, former partners with Peter, replied that they were of the same mind, and speedily the partnership was revived. They returned to Palestine and took possession of the ships and fishing tackle which they had abandoned three years before in obedience to the Master's call – "I will make you fishers of men." We can imagine the disappointment of those men; and yet as they looked back and thought of the blessings experienced during the three years of following Jesus they must have felt glad as well as regretful; glad that they had been with the Master, and that they had had such a blessed season of cooperation, but regretful that the whole matter had evidently come to naught; that in the eyes of their neighbors and friends they had made fools of themselves, been deceived; they must have been grieved also because a return to the former occupation would be comparatively distasteful to them. Their first

night's experience in the fishing business was calculated to disappoint them greatly; they toiled all night and caught nothing.

"JESUS STOOD ON THE SHORE"

With the morning dawn they were approaching the shore faint-hearted and discouraged, when a voice from the shore attracted their attention; some one calling for fish, they were obliged to reply that they had none. Then the stranger on the shore directed that the net be cast on the right side of the boat. They followed the suggestion of letting down the net again, when immediately it was full of large fish.

It was the loving John who first realized that the miracle implied that the stranger on the shore was the Lord, and he proclaimed his conviction to Peter. The latter, a man of action, and doubtless still suffering at heart from his denial of the Lord, plunged into the sea and swam ashore, but evidently was timid when he reached the land and waited and helped to pull the net full of fish to the shore. When the three fishermen were landed and things made fast and safe, it was noticed that the stranger had a fire of coals and fish thereon, and he invited the weary ones to come and have breakfast with him. This they did. It is not probable that they ate in silence, yet their conversation is not recorded, except that none of the disciples felt at liberty to inquire if it were the Lord, knowing, confident that it was he. There is no indication that on this occasion our Lord appeared with marks in his hands or his feet or his side; everything implies that he appeared in still another form, and was thus giving them another lesson in the fact that he not only had risen from the dead but was wholly changed, and was now a spirit being, who could go and come like the wind and they could not tell whence he came or whither he went; he could appear in a form best suited to the occasion.

"SIMON, LOVEST THOU ME?"

Poor Peter was doubtless wishing for some favorable opportunity to make some amends for his denial of the Lord, when our Lord looked at him and addressed him not as Peter, a rock, but as Simon, saying, "Lovest thou me more than these?" He may have meant, Do you love me more than these nets and boats and this fishing business? or he may have meant, Do you love me more than these other disciples? At least there was an opportunity for Peter to call to mind his own rather boastful expression of love for the Lord on the same night in which he denied him. He had said, "Lord, though all should forsake thee yet will not I." Peter replied without making any comparison between himself and the others or the fishing implements, saying, "Lord, thou knowest that I love thee." Our Lord used the word *agapao* for love, while Peter used a different word, *phileo*, supposed to signify a warm, personal affection. Upon this declaration our Lord replied, "Feed my lambs," my little sheep. There was in this the suggestion of a partial restoration of Peter to the work of the ministry. Three years before, our Lord had taught the multitudes on the shore from Peter's boat, and subsequently had performed the miracle of granting them a great draught of fishes, so great that the net broke. Following that incident, our Lord had said to Peter and James and John, "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men." Now he gave them a similar miracle, and the net did not break, although 153 large fish were caught; and it was now, after this catch, that **[R4184 : page 172]** our Lord wished again to start the apostles as fishers of men under the auspices of the Gospel dispensation beginning with Pentecost, when they would be endued with power from on high. Although our Lord did not directly reprove Peter, he nevertheless impressed upon him the seriousness of his mistake and his denial, and intimated that thereby he had forfeited his place as one of the apostles. This new commission that he might feed the lambs of the flock indirectly implied that he might not be a full shepherd amongst the sheep.

But our Lord again put the same question in the same form, and Peter replied in the same words. Jesus then extended the commission to him, saying, "Tend my sheep," care for the sheep, serve the sheep. By these two parts of the commission Peter was authorized to feed the lambs, but merely to tend the sheep; he had not yet received the full liberties of shepherding. As Peter had denied the Lord three times, so our Lord questioned him the third time, this time, however, changing the word for love to *phileo*. Perhaps Peter recognized the analogy; in any event he was deeply grieved at this third questioning of his love and that our Lord used this time the word *phileo*. Peter's reply was pathetic, "Lord, thou knowest all things; thou knowest that I love thee." With this third confession our Lord restored him fully as a bishop or shepherd, saying, "Feed my sheep." He was authorized not only to feed the lambs and tend the sheep but finally to feed the sheep also. We are glad [R4184 : page 173] for Peter; and we admire our Lord's course in adopting such a skilful method of reproof and his generosity in not reproving more severely. Let us learn lessons from this grand exemplar! Are there any other lessons we may learn from our Lord's words? Is it not well that we inquire each of his own heart whether or not we have a warm, deep, earnest love for the Lord, or if it is only a general love and admiration? We are to seek to cultivate that personal fellowship with the Master which will enable us to answer these questions affirmatively, and to assure him that we love him more than lands or houses, boats or nets, parents or children, husband or wife or self. As our heavenly Bridegroom he is worthy of our love, and if we do not feel this love toward him we are not of the kind fit for the Kingdom, not fit to be members of the Bride, the Lamb's Wife. And how shall we know, how shall we test our own hearts as to the degree of our love for the Lord? How will the Lord test us if not by permitting trials and difficulties, oppositions, etc., to overtake us? As our Lord hid himself from the apostles for three weeks or more, yet was near them watching over them and ready to take advantage of the most favorable moment to impart the necessary lessons, so we

may be sure that he watches over our interests to give us needed instruction and guidance – and if sometimes he hides his face behind a frowning providence it is with a view to our blessing or strengthening, to prepare us to appropriate some valuable lessons which will be helpful to us in our preparation for a place in the throne. Let us, then, rejoice even in tribulation, knowing what it is working out, and in such tribulation let us ask ourselves the question, How am I showing my Lord that I love him supremely?

As our Lord said to Peter upon the profession of his love that he might feed the lambs and tend and feed the sheep, so he says to all who are his followers. Not that we can have the honorable place of apostles in connection with the Lord's dear flock, but that each of us may find opportunities for tending and assisting, feeding, nourishing the flock of God, especially all whom the Lord's providences place in the Church as elders so that, as the Apostle Paul said of the elders at Ephesus, they may feed the flock of God over whom the Spirit has made them overseers, bishops, shepherds. (Acts 20:28.) It is proper, nevertheless, that each one for himself provide things decent and honest in the sight of all in a temporal way; it is also necessary and proper that each under-shepherd give attention to his own spiritual feeding and refreshment; but it is very important that the Master's commission in respect to the flock shall have a prominent place in our hearts, that we shall rightly esteem it a great privilege to feed and to tend the Lord's followers in his name and as far as possible in his spirit of self-denial, self-sacrifice, in loving service, laying down our lives for the sheep, as he did. Whoever is heedless of the sheep should not in any sense of the word be recognized as an Elder, a leader, and each dear Elder should be esteemed and chosen to the position by his brethren because of evidence of loving zeal and devotion to the cause of the great Shepherd and the flock, and not from any selfish or worldly reasons. The primary qualification of an Elder in the Church, an under-shepherd, must necessarily be love for the Lord. All of the eloquence, all of the zeal might be

hindrances and injurious to the flock's best interest, except as love for the great Shepherd would be the mainspring of action. And how may we know who has love for the Lord, and know of its measure? Our Lord tells us through the Apostle that if we love not our brethren whom we have seen we would be deceiving ourselves if we claim to love God, whom we have not seen. Hence love for our Lord must be expected to manifest itself in love for the brethren, and only those who manifest great love and sympathy, benevolence, patience, gentleness, brotherly kindness for the dear flock, are to be considered faithful shepherds or worthy of eldership. The self-seeking, the ambitious are to be feared and not to be encouraged.

"WHAT SHALL THIS MAN DO?"

Following the questioning our Lord, still addressing the Apostle Peter, made a prophecy respecting him that he would live to be an old man, and that then he would be deprived of his liberties. This was not a very bright prospect to hold out before Peter; it meant a further testing of his loyalty. We are glad to know that the Apostle was not discouraged, and that he was faithful even unto death. The prophecy proved to Peter and to the other apostles present, that in the work in which they were to engage afresh they were not to expect Kingdom honors and blessings, but rather to remember the Lord's previous declaration that the servant is not above his Master, and that as men despitefully used the Master the servants must expect nothing better. How nobly those chosen ones came up to the various tests and requirements placed upon them! There is a lesson for us, too, along the same lines, namely, that faithfulness to our Master will probably bring us tribulation of one kind or another. Hence we are not to seek our own wills or our own ways, but rather to look for and accept the Lord's providential guidance of our interests and to prefer this, knowing that he is able always to make all things work together for our good as New Creatures. John tells us that our Lord's words were understood to

signify that Peter would die a violent death, and that in conclusion Jesus said, "Follow me," note my example and copy it.

Peter evidently felt that the conversation was pivoted largely upon himself and sought to turn it a little, saying respecting John, whom he recognized as the Lord's favorite disciple, "Lord, what shall this man do?" What is your prediction and what will be your providence in respect to John? Our Lord's reply was almost curt; it amounted to, Mind your own business and you will have plenty to do, though it was stated in a more polite form. Jesus said, "If I will that he tarry until I come,

WHAT IS THAT TO THEE? FOLLOW THOU ME"

This is a difficult lesson for all of the Lord's followers to learn, but a very important one. If we allow ourselves to look about us and to wonder why some fellow-disciple is not receiving apparently the same amount of chastisement or trials or difficulties or burdens that the Lord permits to come to us, and if then we permit ourselves to become judges of the Lord and his wisdom and his providences, the result will be disastrous to ourselves. It will destroy our peace and undermine our faith and hinder us from learning the lessons necessary to prepare us for the Kingdom. If such criticisms of divine providence at any time come to our minds, we should answer ourselves, promptly, in the **[R4184 : page 174]** language of our Lord to Peter, "What is that to thee? Follow thou me." You are not competent to regulate these matters, nor is it proper nor necessary for the Master to explain to you all of his plans and purposes. It is far better for you that you learn faith, submission and trust. No two of us have the same natural disposition, no two of us, therefore, need the same disciplinary training at the hand of the Lord. We have confidence in his wisdom and love; let us manifest it, realizing that if our trials are greater our blessings will be proportionate, and as the Lord said to Paul, so he would say to each of us, "My grace is sufficient

for thee, my strength is made perfect in weakness." (2 Cor. 12:9.)
With the Apostle let us say, If, therefore, the Lord's grace is proportionate to our trials let us receive with rejoicing all the trials he may send that we may have the more of his grace! It is for each sheep to know the Shepherd and to follow him, taking as straight paths for his feet as possible, and leaving with the Shepherd the general oversight of the flock and its interests, giving attention in proportion as the Lord through the brethren gives opportunity to assist in the shepherding work and in the name of the Lord to counsel or assist his dear flock.

"THAT HE TARRY TILL I COME"

Our Lord had clearly indicated that Peter would not tarry until his second coming, that he would die, and now, without saying that John would tarry until he should come, he merely said, If it should be my arrangement that he tarry till I come, would that interfere, Peter, with your arrangements and my dealings with you as my follower? But the matter became a proverb amongst the Lord's followers that John would not [R4185 : page 174] die, and the fact is that he outlived all the other apostles. Yet he himself did not understand the Master's words to mean that he would not die, for he so calls our attention to the matter in this very lesson.

There is a sense in which John has tarried until the second coming of Christ, namely, in that he was made a representative of the whole Church in the book of Revelation. The things which happened to John are the things which have happened or will happen to the Church. The angel showed John – but in reality it was for the John class. John fell down to worship the angel, and was told not to do it, and this is in reality a lesson to the whole Church, that they are not to be worshipers of God's messengers who bear to them the divine Word of truth and grace. The John class is, therefore, still in the world representatively, and we trust

that we are members of it; it has tarried until the second presence of the Lord.

Applying this lesson to ourselves further, we suggest that some of the dear friends seem disposed to query as to how long they must wait before the First Resurrection change shall come and which of them shall remain the longer, etc. Let us leave the entire matter to the Lord; we should be glad if our change should come soon, yet fully content if the Lord has further service for us and the change should be delayed. Those who experience the change the earlier will, of course, have in many respects the greater blessing for the time; but if the Lord has service for us on this side the veil let us be glad to do his will; let us be assured that he will grant sufficient grace for every experience of life.

"LO, I AM WITH THEE ALWAYS"

Our Lord's assurance that he would be with his followers until the end of the age was a consoling message. He did not tell us how long the age would last, nor all the trials and difficulties which would intervene between the time of his ascension and his return for the harvest work and the exaltation of his Church and the beginning of his Kingdom reign. It has been to our advantage that he left us in ignorance on this point; but we are assured, however, that in due time the wise shall understand; and again through the Apostle we are assured, "Ye, brethren, are not in darkness that that day should overtake you as a thief." (I Thess. 5:4), but "as a snare shall it come upon all them that dwell on the face of the whole earth." (Luke 21:35.) Our Lord indicated that at his second coming he would give such a knock as would arouse his faithful ones and lead to the trimming of their lamps, that they might know of the presence of the Bridegroom and be prepared to enter with him to the wedding festival. It is not intended that this prophetic knock should be heard by the world; it is intended only for the virgin class, wise and foolish.

Evidently our Lord did not intend that we should understand these words of the Golden Text to mean that he would be personally present in the world throughout the age. Rather we must understand him, in harmony with other statements, to the effect that the holy Spirit, the holy power of God, which came at Pentecost, was the representative of the Father and of the Son, the Spirit of both with the enlightening and instructing power, supervising all of our affairs and interests, expedient for us, beneficial to us. How glad we are that it is our great privilege to be living now in the time of the *parousia*, the presence of the Lord, and to have his special supervision in the same manner as when he was present with his disciples during those forty days before he ascended. But we are not to expect any materialization or manifestation of our Lord's presence, such as was appropriate and indeed necessary at that time. We have seen that the necessity then was that the disciples should have convincing proof that our Lord was risen and that he was not any longer human but capable of appearing in various forms. No longer are these lessons needed, for we know he is a spirit being and is present with us in this harvest time supervising all the work of the harvest. Indeed, we have every reason to be on guard now against the manifestations of the Adversary, knowing from the Scriptures that the evil spirits, the fallen angels, will have considerable power in the way of materializing, and that it will be part of their deception to endeavor to ensnare and deceive us by impersonating the Lord and the holy ones as well as earthly friends. Let us not seek to walk by sight, but to be quite content to walk by faith, as our Lord desires us to do. The promise to us now is that we shall see him as he is – not as he was – because we shall be changed that we may be made like him. He will no longer change himself to appear as a man to us.

