

"THE DISCIPLE WHOM JESUS LOVED"

"Then Peter, turning about, seeth the disciple whom Jesus loved following; who also leaned on his breast at supper, and said, Lord, which is he that betrayeth thee?" John 21:20.

No lives were more full of virtue and value than those of our Lord's disciples. Their associations with Christ afforded them privileges and possibilities that were rare among men. Outstanding among these disciples was John, about whom we shall now study with profit.

John was the son of Zebedee and Salome, and the brother of James, who was also one of the disciples of Christ. This family was very fortunate in that the members thereof did not have to breathe the impure air of a pent-up city. Their home was out in the open, where the fresh breezes from both the hills and the sea blew around it. The habits of the parents in that family were not those of indolence and self-indulgence which generate disease, nor, on the other hand, of hard brain-work which tends to enervate the system.

John inherited what is almost essential to mental and moral fitness and greatness -- a splendid physique. He grew up amidst healthful and invigorating conditions. As a boy, he spent many days of unflagging delight near or on picturesque Galilee. His father earned a livelihood for himself and his family by operating a fleet of fishing boats through several hired men. From his boyhood John was conditioned to the sight, sound, smell, and pull of boats and sails with all their gear, rigging, ropes, nets, and fish. This intelligent young man, who fished in the choppy waters of blue Galilee, was not a tenderfoot or a softy. There was something startling, electrifying, and powerful about John. Like the Sea of Galilee, he was given to outbursts of anger and to whirlwinds of enthusiasm; so much so that Christ nicknamed him, "Son of Thunder." Repeatedly, in his young manhood, he exhibited his besetting sins of intolerance, ambition, and pride.

John was a close student of nature. To his eyes nature towered in some of her lovely and majestic aspects, and spoke, in the rustle of lofty trees, the howl of winds, and the roar of billows, strange and stirring poetry to his heart.

Various things accounted for John becoming the man that he was. One was the fact that he had a good father and a good mother. Whether or not his father was deeply religious, it is clear that his mother was, notwithstanding the gust of ambition that once swept through her soul. Her services to Christ, especially her following Him to the cross, show that she was a woman of noble type -- generous, loving, self-sacrificing, and heroic. The mother, more than any other finite force, shapes the mind, moulds the character, and determines the destiny of the boy. Her son is as clay in her hands. John's older brother, James, had a wholesome influence over him also. What a wonderful relationship is possible between an older and a younger brother! What a steadying force each can be for the other! James and John loved each other and took great pride in each other, which was right and what all brothers should do. It is good to see a firm of brothers, and few things are more sad or cast a greater reflection on a family than a disharmony between children of the same parents.

In his religious training, John came under the preaching and influence of John the Baptist, that prophet of God who was stirring the whole nation. In view of the fact that John had a hot and ardent nature, it is not surprising that the stern preacher of the desert was much to his liking. John the Baptist was a man who spoke what he believed, and who believed what he said. When John listened to him, he was enthralled.

At one of his afterpreaching gatherings John the Baptist, fresh from the waters of the Jordan, saw the Messiah coming and said: "Behold the Lamb of God, who taketh away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). Thus brought into contact with Christ through the testimony of John the Baptist, John became attached to the Saviour with an unbreakable cord of love. That day there began a fellowship which continued until Christ died.

One day, while Zebedee, James, John, and the hired servants were mending their broken nets, Christ called to the brothers from the shore, saying, "Follow me." His voice carried the authority of deity and rightfully commanded the obedience of the brothers. James and John both knew that the time for action had come. With an unhesitating readiness of faith, and in obedience to that call, they immediately left their father and mother, their happy and comfortable home, their boats and their nets, and their all, and they followed Christ. The fact that Christ called John is an indication that He also has a work for you and me to do.

Gazing at John with eyes of love, Christ saw him as a disciple in the process of development, and a soul in the shaping. John's character was still immature. After that, time and again John did things that must have grieved the Saviour, and quite frequently he said things that must have struck a discordant note, and yet Christ still loved him devotedly. Christ saw John, as He sees us, through the eyes of love. And, love sees the end as well as the beginning. Just as certainly as Christ sees the oak in the acorn, and the bird in the egg, He also sees the man that is yet to be. Christ sees us not only as we are, but also as we may become when the work of grace is complete.

Later, with the aid and at the suggestion of their astute mother, James and John were executing a plot to come into the best positions in the earthly kingdom which they expected Christ to establish presently. They came to Christ with the bold request: "Grant that we may sit one on thy right hand and the other on thy left hand in thy kingdom." That was an ambitious and presumptuous request. But worse than that, it was naked selfishness; it was impudent forwardness, and it was headstrong vanity. It certainly revealed a lack of generosity toward others. It also showed a disrespect for their feelings. This crass self-seeking, on their part, must have distressed Christ, but He dealt with them as a father might deal with a child that had made a senseless request. Very delicately He dismissed it as childish ignorance, saying, "You know not what you ask." Yet, when He questioned them as to their fitness for such an honor saying: "Can ye drink my cup and be baptized with my baptism?", they said: "We can."

John became an indefatigable worker for the Master. Being a part of the inner circle among the disciples, John accompanied his Lord everywhere He went. He was His constant companion, His beloved friend, and His fellow-laborer in a common cause.

The records of the Master and His men reveals the fact that John occupied the primacy -- not of natural gift, aptitude, leadership, or zeal -- but of friendly relationship with Christ. In a special sense he was His friend, "the disciple whom Jesus loved." Plainly there was that in John which drew him and Christ together into an unusual degree of mutual understanding and appreciation. Yet, temperament, capacity, and natural bent played their part in determining each man's response to the love and influence of the Master.

One day John saw a man casting out demons in the name and by the power of Christ. But this was quite irregular. The man was not a bona fide follower of Christ; not one of the select circle, but was an outsider. It was very displeasing to John that a man who was not of their company was making use of the name of Christ. Even though the man was using the name of Christ for a good purpose, John rebuked him and told him to stop it.

John reported the incident to Christ with apparent pride, saying, "Master, we saw one casting out demons in thy name, and he followeth not us: and we forbade him because he followeth not us." Evidently John expected Christ to commend him, but He rebuked him instead, saying, "Forbid him not: for there is no man which shall do a miracle in my name, that can lightly speak evil of me. For he that is not against us is on our part" (Mark 9:39-40).

At a later date, Christ and His disciples were going through Samaria, on their way from Galilee to Jerusalem to attend the Passover. As nightfall was approaching, two of the

disciples went into a certain village of the Samaritans to arrange for lodging for Christ and His party during the night. When they requested this much-needed courtesy, the fanatical villagers reminded them that "the Jews have no dealings with the Samaritans," and flatly refused them lodging for the night. They were so bitter that they would not allow any Jew, not even Christ Himself, to sleep in their town over night. With bitter and insulting words they refused to extend hospitality to Christ and His followers, and in no uncertain terms told them to seek lodging from their own countrymen, the Jews. Angered at this rudeness and incivility to the Master, John, along with James, came to Christ with the wild proposal: "Lord, wilt thou that we command fire to come down from heaven, and consume them?" John's strong conviction and boundless enthusiasm caused him to think that such inhospitable, inhuman, and vindictive people did not deserve to live. In his zeal for the Lord, Whom he loved devotedly, he would have removed those rude and churlish Samaritans from the face of the earth. Very much displeased with this specimen of ill-will and pious ferocity, Christ said: "Ye know not what spirit ye are of," and then He went on to say: "The Son of man has not come to destroy the lives of men, but to save them."

John never intimated that he was the recipient of the Master's affection above the measure which was bestowed upon others. John loved because Christ first loved him. Unlike some professing Christians today, who must attract attention to themselves or suffer, John did not dilute his love by talking about it, or vulgarize it by parading it. So long as he could be with his Lord, quietly and unobtrusively ministering to Him, nothing else mattered. Love like that of John for Christ is a pearl of great price to our Lord.

In the company of Christ, with his inquisitive mind and understanding heart wide open to everything that Christ said and did, John lived a long and exceptionally useful life. His years of fellowship with Christ, listening to His instruction, and yielding to His will transformed John into the apostle of love. What he became shows that John was a man of large receptivity. The ability to receive is always one of the essentials of greatness. Regardless of the kind of person John was in his early manhood, his later life presents him to us as the most intelligent, scholarly, and original of the twelve apostles — the man with a clear vision, a bold imagination, a poetic genius, and a complete dedication. He lived with, listened to, and labored for Christ.

Our Lord wanted John near or with Him in every crisis. He was the most intimate friend of the Master and he had the place nearest to His heart. He pillowed his head on the bosom of the Master on one occasion. That was as near as any man ever got to Christ. There is no place which is any nearer.

John was the only apostle present at the crucifixion of our Saviour. In those dark hours John was what he had been through the years, "the disciple whom Jesus loved" standing by faithfully. He would not forsake his Lord then. He was His constant companion, tender friend, zealous supporter, faithful apostle, and courageous disciple. He would not fail his Lord when He needed him most. When the sneering and cursing enemies were all about, John gave his finest testimony of love and loyalty. He stood with Christ through it all. He could not relieve Christ's sad plight, but he could stand by His cross, and he did. While Christ was hanging on the cross, He committed His mother to John; an act which proved His boundless confidence and trust in John. When John saw Christ bow His head and die, he did not forget. He did not cease to love and serve Him. He led the grief-stricken mother of the Lord Jesus from the dark, tragic scene and took her to his own home and cared for her. His tender and loving care of Mary until her death was of the greatest possible comfort to her.

John was close to Christ in the ecstasy of the happy days following His resurrection. John watched when the cloud wrapped its mantle about Him at His ascension. He was with the others in the upper room, when they claimed the promise of the Father until the Holy

Spirit endued them with power at Pentecost. Then he marched out among men to tell them about the Saviour and to serve them in His name. Then John dipped his pen in the well of his love and loyalty and wrote of the deity of the Christ in order that men "might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye might have life through his name." From his Master John learned that "God is love," and he proved by his life that the whole duty of man is to love Him. In his old age John was carried into the church at Ephesus every Lord's Day, and sitting in his chair he would say: "Little children, love one another." Questioned as to why he reiterated that statement, the old man would always reply: "Because this is the Lord's sole command. If we fulfill this, there's nothing more to be done." Will you be one to do this for your Lord?