

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

For reply: Email: truthfortoday@aol.com

Broadcast Date: 10 September 2000

No. T0127

Speaker: Mr. Ernie Brown

Night Scenes of Scripture: A night with the Servant - John 13:1-17

One of the many beauties of the Bible is that it is full of contrasts. For instance, many of the great deeds in the Bible are recorded as having happened early in the morning, at the beginning of the day. On the other hand, many significant events happened in the hours of darkness, overnight. In this series on "Night Scenes with Jesus," we turn today to John 13:1-17.

This scene is particularly poignant, because it was the last evening before Jesus was crucified, or as we read in 1 Corinthians 11:23, "the same night in which He was betrayed." Here, in John 13, it is put rather differently. Verse 1 is very dramatic. "Now before the feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that His hour was come that He should depart out of this world unto the Father, having loved His own which were in the world, He loved them unto the end."

Browsing through the Gospel of John, it becomes obvious that the narrative is punctuated with references to the feast of the Passover. Closer examination will determine that overall, four consecutive Passovers are referred to. They cover, broadly speaking, the public ministry of the Lord Jesus, which lasted somewhat over three years. The Passover referred to here (and from here onwards in this Gospel) was the last of the four. Events were building up to a climax. The fulfilment of what the Passover represents was about to take place in the death of the Lord Jesus at Calvary as an offering for sin. Early indication of this had been given in this Gospel by John the Baptist when, pointing to the Lord Jesus, he said, "Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world." (1:29).

Superficially, events would seem to be getting out of control, certainly from the disciples' point of view. Things were due to get much worse. But the Holy Spirit guides the Apostle John to put things in a way that reminds us that nothing would be allowed to happen that would thwart the will of God. Indeed, the story unfolds in a very positive way.

First of all it says, "Jesus knew." As all regular Bible readers will know, the emphasis in John's Gospel is that Jesus is God. It affirms His personal deity. The opening verse of the Gospel tells us, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." One of the recurring phrases throughout the Gospel of John is that Jesus knew. And, of course, omniscience (knowing all things) is one of the attributes of deity. So, even if the disciples were taken unawares at times, the Lord Jesus knew what was going on all the time.

It would have been accurate for the evangelist to record here, "His hour was come that He should be crucified." John records various vital epochs in the Gospel as "hours," highlighting vital stages and aspects of the Lord's life and service. I commend the study to you for your meditation and enjoyment. Here, the "hour" selected is very positive. The hour that He should depart out of this world, unto the Father. Here He was, about to be betrayed, abused and eventually crucified. But two very positive considerations fill His mind and heart.

First of all, He, God the Son, was about to leave the world which hated both Him and His Father. He was about to complete the work His Father had given Him to do. When He considered His departure out of the world, what was uppermost in His mind? Not what men would do to Him! Not the manner of His exit out of the world, although even that is given a special character in John's Gospel! It was not even that He was going back to heaven, from which He had come. No, the main thought in His mind is well given in the text. It was "the hour that He should depart out of this world unto the Father." Such was the sublime, eternally subsisting relationship and mutual love between God the Father and God the Son that this was the pre-eminent thought of the Son of God on this night of all nights. He was about to depart out of this world unto the Father.

Secondly, He thought of this special band of disciples who had persevered with Him through thick and thin, through so many experiences, both pleasant and painful. They were very special to Him. He calls them "His own." It says, "He loved them." Of course, He did. They were the special object of His love. It says, "having loved His own which were in the world, He loved them unto the end", or "to the uttermost," or "through everything" as it might be understood to mean. The world, that is, the people in the world, particularly the rulers of the world, hated Him without a cause. But He had singled out of the world this small band who were utterly devoted to Him. 'There was a special bond between Him and them. He loved them as no other group had ever been loved before. And He was about to tell them of the wonderful way in which His love had provided for them after He had departed out of this world unto the Father.

Sadly, there was an exception. Verse 2 says, “the devil having now put into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon’s son, to betray Him”. What a terrible thing! Here was a man to whom every privilege had been extended. Here he was, willing to respond to the temptations of the devil. Make no doubt about it. Judas was fully responsible for everything he did. He is accountable to God for all his responsible deeds, like all the rest of us. In case we are in any doubt, the Holy Spirit does not let Judas get away with it. Wherever he is mentioned in the Bible, he is referred to as the traitor, the betrayer, or similar terms. God knows. God notices. God records. God will judge. What Judas was about to do did not in any way defeat or bring to nothing God’s plans. On the contrary, the wilful act of Judas in betraying his Master was, circumstantially, the means by which the basis was laid for the will of God to be established. As we read in Genesis 50:20, Joseph said to his brothers about the way they had betrayed him, “as for you, ye thought evil against me, but God meant it unto good.” Again, the psalmist could say in Psalm 76:10, “Surely the wrath of man shall praise Thee.” Of course, rather than excuse Judas, this only shows what the heart of unregenerate man is like, deep down. Judas enjoyed all the privileges open to the other disciples, and more than most. Yet, he was determined to betray the One Who had blessed him so much.

Arising from that, and knowing that things were coming to a head, the Lord Jesus began the final preparation of the hearts and minds of the disciples, so that they would understand the implications of what lay ahead, both for Him and for them. Verses 4 and 5 say, “He laid aside His garments, and took a towel, and girded Himself. After that He poureth water into a basin, and began to wash the disciples’ feet, and to wipe them with the towel wherewith He was girded.” The meaning of His behaviour was plain to see. He was their Master and Teacher. Apart from Judas, who significantly is never recorded as calling Jesus Lord, the other disciples were delighted to own His Lordship and authority over them. Yet, here was Jesus, putting aside the clothes, the outer apparel, proper to His normal habit, and bowing at their feet, humbly serving them.

The general lesson is valuable in any sphere. Whatever our professional or social status, we should never be too proud to humble ourselves and help others, even serve others. Here was the Son of God, the creator and Sustainer of the universe, bowing humbly at their feet, ministering refreshment to them. Where they lived, journeys were taken mainly on foot. The heat of the day, the dust of the path, the weariness experienced towards the end of a busy day, all took their toll. The act of providing and applying cool, refreshing water and drying the feet with a towel, all these things were the activities of a servant, not a master. The disciples knew that full well.

The Lord comes to Peter. Peter is horrified. “Surely, Lord, you’re not going to wash my feet.” The Lord replies “Peter you aren’t going to understand this now, but you will eventually.” Peter’s reaction was prompt and predictable. “Never, Lord, I can’t let you do that.” The Lord quietly persists. “Peter, I must. If you don’t let me provide you with relief and refreshment in this way, I shan’t be able to lead you into the enjoyment of My things.” This is a very good general lesson, taught in many parts of the Bible. Unless we allow the Lord to help us in our things, we shall never be able to rise above them and enter into the blessing and enjoyment of His things, spiritual things, heavenly things. This is what is conveyed by the Lord’s statement to Peter, “If I wash thee not, thou hast no part with Me.” “Part with Me.” That is the significant phrase.

Peter’s reaction to this is, once more, entirely predictable. How wholehearted he was. He goes from one extreme to the other. In for a penny, in for a pound. That was Peter! No half measure! “Lord not my feet only, but also my hands and my head.” You know, the Bible never ever refers to the Lord as being in a light hearted mood. No frivolous activity or attitude is ever attributed to Him. Nevertheless, I can well imagine almost a half smile on the Lord’s face as He gently leads Peter on. “Now, now, Peter! There’s no need for that. You don’t need a full bath. All you need is for you to be made comfortable and feel refreshed by having the dust and defilement of a busy day and a long journey removed from your feet.”

Now, I know that you might well tell me, “Oh, when I’m hot and sticky after a long day, washing my feet wouldn’t be enough for me. I like a long, hot soak or, at the very least, a refreshing shower.” I know that. But there is a moral and spiritual lesson here that we must not miss. The Lord conveys it by broadening the lesson, from Peter personally to the whole group of disciples. “He that is bathed all over needeth not but to wash His feet, but is clean every whit: and ye are clean, but not all. For He knew who should betray Him, therefore said He, Ye are not all clean.” The teaching involved, and the general application derived from it, are like this.

There is a spiritual cleansing which is fundamental. Once it has been achieved, it never needs to be repeated. It applies for ever. That is referred to here as being “washed”, “bathed all over”, “clean every whit”, totally clean. This was evidently true of the disciples in general. They were basically, fundamentally clean, through the word which Jesus had spoken unto them, as we read in 15:3. This is a picture of the once and for all, eternally effective, cleansing produced in us by the word of God, in the power of the Holy Spirit. Clean forever in the sight of God, because His word has been effective in our souls. Ready for heaven, while living on earth.

However, while the end of the journey is entirely secure, there’s a long way to go. Like the wilderness journey the Israelites had to trek, many tiring days might well lie ahead for us in this life, before we get to the end. Each day,

wearied feet will need relief and refreshment. Daily contact with the world, and the people in the world, inevitably brings defilement, which must be loosened and washed away before it sticks and becomes an integral part of us. This is the picture. This is the lesson. As the word of God was the agent used to produce fundamental cleansing in our souls, so the word of God is the agent God uses to remove moral defilement and refresh our weary spirits as necessary day by day. But while the provision of this relief is so nice and soothing, it is not an end in itself. We who are fundamentally right with God by faith in Christ are intended to enjoy all the spiritual blessings God has prepared for us. In order to do so, we must be relieved of the distress and discomfort of our pilgrim journey through the world, so that our spirits might be liberated to enter freely into the spiritual bounty God has secured for us through Christ. In the language of this chapter, our feet need washing by the Lord every day so that we might have part with Him in His things. He does this as we read the scriptures and allow its cleansing and healing power to flow over our souls day by day.

In passing, note the reference once more to the Lord's omniscience. He knew what was going on behind the scenes and in the disciples' minds. He knew who would betray Him. Quite clearly, Judas was not clean, in the sense the Lord spoke of it. The Lord's words delivered in his hearing over more than three years of daily contact had received no response from the heart of Judas.

Peter then, with persuasion, evidently allowed his feet to be washed by the Lord. Verse 12 says, "So, after He had washed their feet, and had taken His garments, and was sat down again, He said unto them, "Know ye what I have done?" So, having demonstrated what He meant the disciples to learn, He makes sure they understand what He had done by explaining it to them in words. He had dressed again in His normal clothes. He resumed His normal place amongst them. He applied the lesson.

"You recognise Me to be your Teacher and Lord. You are quite right to do so. But if you do really accept Me as your Lord, you will be ready to apply the teaching I have just given you. That is, if I, your Lord and Teacher, am prepared to serve you as I have done, in washing your feet, you should have no objection to serving one another. I have laid down the example. It is for you to follow the lead I have given you. You recognise Me as your Leader. Fair enough. If I have been willing to act as your servant, it should be no hardship for any of you to serve one another by washing each others' feet."

For them, the washing was actual, physical. For them, and us, the application is both practical and spiritual. We must be prepared to help one another in any way open to us. The teaching of scripture is quite straightforward. The best service Christian believers can provide for one another is the refreshing application of the word of God. It is so versatile that it meets every kind of need. If, in addition, and alongside that, we are in a position to help one another, and serve one another, in a material and practical way, we do well. In the Epistle of James, that most practical Epistle, we read in 1:27, "Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this: to visit the fatherless and the widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world." How straightforward! Willingness to provide practical help where necessary, and personal purity, are the proper outcome and result of being clean in God's sight by faith in Christ. You cannot get any better summing up of the Christian faith than that.

The Lord's final word is worthy of universal application. "If ye know these things, happy are ye if ye do them." In many situations, the problem is not usually that we don't know what we should do. The problem, if any, is that we don't want to do it.

Let us do all that we can to follow the example laid down, and the teaching given by our blessed Lord, in that amazing night scene with Jesus, the perfect Servant. Amen.

Please Note:

We encourage you to use this transcript for your personal or group Bible studies. This material should not, however, be used in any publications without the express permission from Truth for Today, whose contact details can be found on page 1. Large Print copies of this document are also available upon request.