

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Belonging to Jesus: My Brethren - John 20:17

“Jesus saith unto her, Touch me not; for I am not yet ascended to my Father: but go to my brethren, and say unto them, I ascend unto my Father, and your Father; and to my God, and your God.”

The incident from which our scripture is taken opens with Mary Magdalene standing outside the empty sepulchre in which the body of the Lord Jesus had lain. The rest of the disciples had all gone home. She is found there alone, weeping in her sorrow as she supposed she had lost the Lord Jesus, whom she loved dearly for ever. As the subject we are considering brings before us the highest Christian privilege and blessing, we may wonder why this communication was given to a woman.

I believe that one of the reasons for this is that in Mary Magdalene we see one who had been marvellously delivered from her previous life when she was completely dominated by demons. Consequently her whole life from that moment was taken up with the blessed Man whom she loved dearly. If we are to enjoy the greatest Christian privileges, then we need to be delivered from everything in our lives, which would take the place that Christ should have. Our affections need to be centred on Him, as He is the centre from which all these blessings flow out.

It may not be necessary to know and understand all the doctrines of Christianity. If it were so, many of us would be excluded from the enjoyment of these things. It is rather to do with our love for the Lord Jesus and being prepared to put all else aside for Him.

Mary obviously did not believe that the Lord Jesus was raised from the dead. She was seeking for His dead body. Her little world had suddenly all gone wrong as she thought she had lost Him forever. But her love for Him was so great that she wanted to bestow all the honour that she could even upon His corpse.

The two angels who were sitting, one at the head and the other at the feet where the body of Jesus had lain, caused her no fear. They asked her, “Woman, why weepest thou?” They could see her tears but could not enter into what was in her heart that caused her tears. She turns round, having found no comfort from the angels and sees Jesus standing but does not recognise Him. He not only saw her tears but His question probed her heart. “Woman, why weepest thou? Whom seekest thou?” Her sorrow was caused by what her heart had lost. We may wonder why she did not recognise the Lord as, apart from the wounds of crucifixion, I believe He would have looked just the same. But unbelief will often blind the eyes. It was so with those two who were going home to Emmaus; they also did not recognise the Lord when He drew near and went with them.

This has a word to us surely. Unless we have the faith to believe what the Bible tells us, how can we enter into the enjoyment of the blessings that it tells? The Lord Jesus is indeed raised from the dead and has gone back to heaven as a man. It is from that place, in the presence of His Father, that He would bring you and me in fellowship with Himself and His Father. How can that be, if we do not believe that He is there?

The Lord Jesus not only saw the tears of Mary, but also knew why she wept. He wanted her to tell Him, “Sir, if thou have borne Him hence, tell me where thou hast laid Him, and I will take Him away” In her answer Mary laid bare what was in her heart and the Lord Jesus appreciated it. I wonder if we have ever had an experience like this. Have you ever told the Lord Jesus how much you love Him? He, of course knows it, so it is no good saying things that we do not mean. But He loves to hear us tell Him. If we do we can be sure that a real blessing will flow from it. In thinking of the Lord's next word to her, I am reminded of His words in John 10:3, “and the sheep hear His voice: and He calleth His own sheep by name, and leadeth them out,” and the end of verse 4: “and the sheep follow Him: for they know His voice.” “Jesus saith unto her, Mary.” The use of her own name immediately causes Mary to recognise Him and she calls Him ‘Rabboni’ which really means ‘My dear Master’. The Shepherd calls to one of His sheep and the sheep responds to the Shepherd, because there was a mutuality of love between them. Everything for Mary at that moment changed. Her tears were wiped away. Her sorrow was gone! He was alive!

It is impossible to describe the joy of a believer when he or she realises that Jesus is alive now. Though we may not be able to see Him, the Holy Spirit brings Him consciously before us and the heart is set free from every other object to be centred on Him. But Mary had further lessons to learn. She would have held Him. She thought that everything

was to be as it was before He was crucified. But the Lord says in verse 17, "Touch Me not; for I am not yet ascended to My Father." He was in effect saying, "Mary, you cannot have Me as you had Me before." I am reminded of the words of Paul in 2 Corinthians 5:16 and 17, "Wherefore henceforth know we no man after the flesh: yea, though we have known Christ after the flesh, yet now henceforth know we Him no more. Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new."

Mary had known Christ 'after the flesh' and she would have liked to have Him still in that way, but "all things had become new." He was now in resurrection; everything connected with things after the flesh had ended in His death. But a new order of things had begun in resurrection. It is in that sphere of life that we can now know Christ. We can have no relationship with Christ, as He was as a man down here. That order of manhood into which He came and which in us was under sin and death has been terminated in His death. But His resurrection has opened out the sphere of new creation, and it is in that life that we are in relationship with Him now and will be for eternity. Sin and death will never have any power over that life, because it is the life of God Himself.

He was about to ascend back to His Father, to that place that was ever His in eternity before He came here as a man. In John 17 speaking to His Father, He says, "I have glorified Thee on the earth: I have finished the work which Thou gavest Me to do. And now, O Father, glorify Thou Me with thine own self with the glory which I had with Thee before the world was." The words 'with Thee' are really 'along side of Thee' and refer to that position of being with the Father. He demands to be re-instated in that place but now as a man. Mary, of course, could not know or understand this. But her love for Him was about to lead her into the profound blessing that He was about to communicate to her and to His disciples. "Go to My brethren, and say unto them, I ascend unto My Father, and your Father; and to My God, and your God."

The Lord Jesus had never before called His disciples 'My brethren'. They were brethren according to the flesh as they all sprang originally from Abraham. This word 'brethren' is used in the Scriptures to denote persons who are all of the same stock or lineage. It is very important to understand this if we are to know what the Lord Jesus meant when He called His disciples 'My brethren'. We have already seen that in resurrection He commences a new creation. The 'seed', from which that new generation has sprung, is Himself in resurrection life. You remember His words in John 12:24, "Verily, verily, I say unto you, Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone: but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit." As a man down here the Lord Jesus was alone. Mainly because of His sinless perfection. But even His disciples misunderstood Him. None of them could enter into His sufferings in the garden of Gethsemane. In fact eventually they all forsook Him and fled. On the cross when 'bearing our sins in His own body' He is even forsaken by His God. His words, "My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?" illustrate how completely alone He was. He dies and is laid in a tomb. But He rises again. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15:23, "Christ the firstfruits; afterward they that are Christ's." T Willey's hymn says,

*"Thou wast alone, till like the precious grain,
In death thou layest, but did'st rise again;
And in Thy risen life, a countless host are "all of one"
With Thee, Thy joy and boast."*

The joy of Mary in finding Him alive could not be compared to the joy that was His. He was bringing His disciples into a new relationship. He ever was in that relationship to His Father, but He was now sharing that relationship with His own, and was about to impart to them the life to enjoy that new relationship. This is true of every believer today. When the Lord Jesus said to Nicodemus in John 3:7, "Ye must be born again" He was in fact saying that the old nature is incapable of receiving anything from God. Sin has ruined us and it is only by the work of the Spirit of God that we can receive blessing from God. So God begins anew with us in new birth. This gives us a new nature that is able to respond to God. So we read in John 1:12 and 13, "But as many as received Him, to them gave He power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on His name: which were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God." These verses make it so clear that the reason why any of us believed on the Lord Jesus was because of the work of God by His Spirit in new birth.

New birth gives us a new nature that responds to God, but it is by believing on the Son that we receive eternal life. These two things are distinct but intimately connected. Having then a new nature and a new life we are able to enter into the new relationship that the Lord Jesus delights to bring us into by knowing His Father as our Father, and His God as our God. So He calls His disciples "my brethren." To this company He delights to reveal the Father and to make His name known. He says in John 17:6, "I have manifested Thy name unto the men which Thou gavest Me out of the world," and again in verse 8, "For I have given unto them the words which Thou gavest Me; and they have received them." Finally at the end of that chapter He says, "And I have declared unto them Thy name, and will declare it: that the love wherewith Thou hast loved Me may be in them, and I in them." So the knowledge of the name of the Father is that whereby we come into the enjoyment of that love that ever existed eternally between the Father and the Son.

What took place as recorded in John 21 we can refer to as happening in the past. But the expression 'My brethren' is used in Hebrews 2:11 and 12 as to what is a present thing. "For both He that sanctifieth and they who are sanctified are all of one; for which cause He is not ashamed to call them brethren, saying, I will declare Thy name unto My brethren, in the midst of the church will I sing praise unto Thee." The expression 'all of one' means again that they are all from the same seed, so the Lord is not ashamed of us. Rather He delights to lead us in response to His Father. The verse actually is a quotation from Psalm 22 where the intense sufferings of the Lord Jesus on account of His bearing our sin, is described. In verse 21 of the Psalm, He says, "Thou hast heard Me from the horns of the unicorns," or from the place of 'impalement', a reference to the death of the cross. Immediately He says, "I will declare Thy name unto My brethren." He then takes up the position of leading the song of praise to His Father. You and I can join in this because we know His Father as our Father. I believe this is the greatest joy of the Lord Jesus, that of leading His own in responsive worship to His Father.

The matter of singing is very important for believers. We can consider this in three ways. We can sing about the Lord Jesus and what He has done for us. Then we can sing to the Lord Jesus in praise and thankfulness for what He has done for us. But I believe the greatest privilege is to sing with the Lord Jesus. You may notice that in Psalm 22 the response to God widens out in ever increasing circles until it fills the entire creation of God. But the theme of praise commences with the Lord Himself and then by those that are nearest and dearest to Him, "My brethren." The seed of Jacob, that is the Jews, also take it up and then finally in verse 27 "All the ends of the world shall remember and turn unto the Lord: and all the kindreds of the nations shall worship before Thee."

So I think you can understand why this is the greatest privilege and blessing that we can enjoy. Christ is the theme and the centre of it. It is His greatest joy.

But there is a future aspect of the term 'brethren.' It is in Romans 8:29, "For whom He did foreknow, He also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren." This takes us back into eternity to the purpose of God before the foundation of this world. Then the 'many brethren' who would believe on the Lord Jesus were marked out for a place with God's beloved Son. And not only given a place but also to be conformed to His image that is made like unto Himself with a glorified body. So is formed that vast company composed of every saint of God from Pentecost to the rapture who would surround the Lord Jesus in order that He might have the place of pre-eminence in that glorious scene. The word 'firstborn' in scripture is a term of rank; it could be translated 'chief' or 'prince'.

The way that God brings this about is explained in verse 30, "Moreover whom He did predestinate, them He also called: and whom He called, them He also justified: and whom He justified, them He also glorified." We have moved on from what God purposed before the world ever existed, to how He has accomplished His purpose. Everything in these two verses is what God is doing. It has nothing to do with our responsibility. If it had then there would be the possibility of it failing. But this will never fail because it is God who does it. Those that He marked out, He called by the gospel. Those who believed through the operation of new birth, He justified by the death and resurrection of His Son. Every one of these will eventually be glorified and made like to His Son in heaven. In that glorious scene the Lord Jesus will be supreme. The words of JN Darby's hymn sum it up,

*"Nor we alone, Thy loved ones all, complete
In glory round Thee there with joy shall meet,
All like Thee, for Thy glory like Thee, Lord,
Object supreme of all, by all adored."*

Then, too, will be fulfilled the desire of the Lord Jesus in His words to His Father, just before He went to the cross, "Father, I will that they also, whom Thou hast given Me, be with Me where I am; that they may behold My glory, which thou hast given Me: for thou lovest Me before the foundation of the world." (John 17:24)

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