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AN EXPOSITORY STUDY OF ST JOHN'S GOSPEL

(Continued)

PROF. F. F. BRUCE, M.A.

II. Jesus Reveals Himself to the World (John 1:19—12:50)

(b) MINISTRY OF JESUS IN GALILEE, JERUSALEM AND SAMARIA

(John 2: 1—4: 42)

V. *Jesus and the Samaritans* (4:1-42)

Ch. 4, v. 27—*And upon this came his disciples; and they marvelled that he was speaking with a woman*—Their wonder was no doubt all the greater because the woman was a Samaritan; but for a rabbi to engage in conversation even with a true-born Jewish woman was regarded by many as a waste of time that might be more profitably spent. The most famous comment on this verse is provided by the words of Jose ben Jochanan, a rabbi of the second century B.C., 'Prolong not conversation with a woman', together with the editorial remark of those who were responsible for preserving his words: "That is to say, even with his own wife; how much more with his neighbour's wife. Hence the wise men say: "He who prolongs conversation with a woman brings evil upon himself, ceases from the words of the law, and at last inherits Gehenna!"'

Yet no man said, What seekest thou? or, Why speakest thou with her?—They knew from experience that their Master always had a good reason for what He did, even when it was strange and unconventional.

v. 28—*So the woman left her waterpot, and went away into the city, and saith to the men,*—She forgot the water of Jacob's well in her excitement at receiving the living water from the Messiah. The wellspring of perennial refreshment was now bubbling up within her. Her abandonment of the waterpot is a parable of the renunciation of the old ceremonial, practised by Jews and Samaritans alike, by those who through faith in Christ have received the divine gift of eternal life. If she had avoided the society of her fellow-citizens before, she was a changed woman now; she must

seek them out and tell them all about the stranger whom she had met.

v. 29—*Come, see a man, which told me all things that ever I did: can this be the Christ?*—When the stranger by the well revealed so surprisingly intimate an acquaintance with the details of her private life, she concluded that He must be a prophet; but she quickly learned that He was not only a prophet, but the great Prophet foretold by Moses for whom she and her fellow-Samaritans had waited so long, the Ta'eb, the Messiah Himself. When He came, they knew that He would explain all mysteries to them; surely, the woman said to the men of the city, this must be He, since He had revealed such comprehensive familiarity with all her doings? 'All things that ever I did' may well be the hyperbole of excitement; in any case, One who knew the points on which He had laid His finger would certainly know everything else about her.

v. 30—*They went out of the city, and were coming to him*—Her fellow-citizens were impressed by her story, and went to see for themselves. We must picture them approaching the well during Jesus' following conversation with His disciples.

v. 31—*In the meanwhile the disciples prayed him, saying, Rabbi, eat.*—They had gone to the city to buy food; now they had brought it, and while the woman was talking to the men of Sychar, they were entreating (the verb *ērōtōn* is in the imperfect tense) their Master to eat. There is a parallelism between the earlier conversation about water and the present conversation about food.

v. 32—*But he said unto them, I have meat to eat that ye know not.*—Although He was weary and thirsty (and probably hungry as well) when He sat by Jacob's well, yet the opportunity of imparting spiritual help to a soul in need appears to have refreshed and invigorated Him. 'Man doth not live by bread alone'.

v. 33—*The disciples therefore said one to another, Hath any man brought him aught to eat?*—Just as the woman had misunderstood His first words about the living water, taking them in a material sense, so the disciples now imagine that He is talking about

physical food. Jesus therefore has to enlighten them further. This is a recurring pattern throughout the discourses recorded in this Gospel.

v. 34—*Jesus saith unto them, My meat is to do the will of him that sent me, and to accomplish his work.*—‘By every thing that proceedeth out of the mouth of the LORD doth man live’, Moses had said (Deut. 8:3); and no one demonstrated the truth of his words more fully than our Saviour. To listen to the Father’s voice and to do His will were the joy and the strength of His life.

Faithful amidst unfaithfulness,
Midst darkness only light,
Thou didst Thy Father’s name confess,
And in His will delight.

And when His course was wellnigh run, He could say to His Father: ‘I glorified thee on the earth, having accomplished the work which thou hast given me to do’ (John 17:4). In both places the verb translated ‘accomplish’ is *teleioō*, ‘to bring to perfection’. Part of the work which the Father gave Him to do was to communicate His blessing to the woman of Sychar, and through her to the other inhabitants of that place; the satisfaction which He now experienced through doing the Father’s will in this respect was far greater than any satisfaction which bread could give.

v. 35—*Say not ye, There are yet four months, and then cometh the harvest? Behold, I say unto you, Lift up your eyes, and look on the fields, that they are white already unto harvest.*—It is not quite certain what the point of the saying about four months and harvest is. Some suppose that the incident took place four months before harvest—i.e., about December. In that case our Lord’s meaning would be: ‘You say that four months have to elapse before the harvest is ripe; but look at this harvest waiting to be reaped!’—referring to the men of Sychar who were coming out to the well to see Him. In support of this view it has been pointed out that the synagogue readings for the period of the year which fell four months before Passover included Ex. 2:15 ff., where a well figures

in the story of Moses, and the following chapter, where the words occur: 'ye shall serve God upon this mountain' (Ex. 3:12; cf. John 4:20). This, however, is not altogether convincing; and in Greek the words, 'There are yet four months, and then cometh the harvest', have a rhythmic form which suggests that we have to do with a popular or proverbial saying, meaning: 'Four months from sowing to harvest'.¹ In that case our Lord's meaning would be: 'You always say, "Four months from sowing to harvest;" but look: the seed has newly been sown and here is the harvest already!'—referring to the approach of the men of Sychar. This is the more probable interpretation.

v. 36—*He that reapeth receiveth wages, and gathereth fruit unto life eternal; that he that soweth and he that reapeth may rejoice together.*—R.V. margin suggests an alternative punctuation, which detaches, 'already' from the end of the former sentence and makes it the first word of this sentence: 'Already the reaper is getting his wages'. Either punctuation suits the context. Jesus Himself was the sower in this instance, having revealed Himself and His regenerating power to the woman; now His disciples had an opportunity to share His joy by helping to reap the harvest that had sprung from His conversation with her and her witness to the other Samaritans. This harvest would not be consumed in due course, as an ordinary harvest would, but would endure 'unto life eternal'.

v. 37—*For herein is the saying true, One soweth, and another reapeth.*—The point of this proverb seems to be that while one may sow and another reap, the labours of both are necessary if a crop is to be harvested; that is why sower and reaper alike have a right to share in the harvest rejoicing. But the scope of the words is here expanded beyond the immediate occasion of the Samaritan mission.

v. 38—*I sent you to reap that whereon ye have not laboured: others have laboured, and ye are entered into their labour.*—This has

¹ The actual interval between sowing and harvest was normally nearer six months than four, but the word translated 'four months' (Gk. *tetramēnos*) simply denotes an interval—one that calls for patience, but will not be unduly prolonged.

reference to the general commission with which Jesus charged His disciples. Prophets and righteous men had gone before them, sowing the seed of the word in faithfulness, but not living to see the full harvest. John the Baptist, the last of that goodly succession, had come as Messiah's forerunner 'to make ready for the Lord a people prepared' (Luke 1:17). And then Jesus Himself came, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God and the drawing near of the appointed time to which men of God in earlier days had eagerly looked forward. He came as the divine kingdom in person (*autobasileia*, as Origen finely put it), the very embodiment of the good news which He brought. He is the Sower *par excellence*; nay more, He is Himself the grain of wheat falling into the ground and dying in order to bring forth much fruit (John 12:24). It is the privilege of His disciples—those of the twentieth century as of the first—to reap the harvest that has sprung from this good seed. The principle contained in these words confronts us in many ways: we have seen one evangelist, gifted as a reaper, harvesting in a few days what has been sown by other evangelists, equally faithful, in patient obscurity over a long time, entering into the labours of others who have preceded him. All alike have their place in the Lord's harvest field; all alike shall receive their reward and share the joy of the last great harvest-home.

v. 39—*And from that city many of the Samaritans believed on him because of the word of the woman, who testified, He told me all things that ever I did.*—The water which she had received from Jesus had certainly become an overflowing fountain in her life, and others were sharing the refreshment that she had begun to enjoy. Let us not be weary in well-doing; the most unlikely soul may prove the most effective witness.

v. 40—*So when the Samaritans came unto him, they besought him to abide with them: and he abode there two days.*—That they should have invited a Jewish teacher to stay with them, with no fear of a rebuff, shows how completely He had won their confidence. If, later, the Lord bade His disciples not to enter into any city of the Samaritans (Matt. 10:5), it was not for any feelings of

contempt or hostility towards them, but rather because the period prescribed for that particular mission was so short that they would not even have time to visit all the Jewish towns on the route which He Himself was to follow.

v. 41—*And many more believed because of his word;*—So the harvest was not limited to those who came out to the well; others in the city believed in Him during His brief sojourn among them. One wonders if by any chance this could have been the same 'city of Samaria' as Philip evangelized a few years later; if it was, the events that took place at this time would explain the ready credence which multitudes gave to Philip when he 'proclaimed unto them the Christ' (Acts 8:5).

v. 42—*and they said to the woman, Now we believe, not because of thy speaking: for we have heard for ourselves, and know that this is indeed the Saviour of the world.*—But for her witness, they would never have come to know Him; but they could not rely on her witness alone: they must know Him for themselves. A second-hand acquaintance with Christ, a hearsay belief in Him, cannot be a substitute for personal knowledge and saving faith. They had proved for themselves that her witness was true; He was indeed all that she said—not only the Prophet like unto Moses but the Saviour of the world. The fact that this title is given to Jesus at this point suggests that the Samaritan mission represents the first outreaching of His grace beyond the confines of Judaism. This is confirmed when we consider the next recipient of His blessing. And the same pattern is repeated in the apostolic history, in conformity with His own direction: 'ye shall be my witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea and Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth' (Acts 1:8).
