

J. C. RYLE'S NOTES ON THE GOSPEL OF JOHN
1:6-13

6. There was a man sent from God, whose name *was* John. 7. The same came for a witness, to bear witness of the Light, that all *men* through him might believe. 8. He was not that Light, but *was sent* to bear witness of that Light. 9. *That* was the true Light, which lights every man that comes into the world. 10. He was in the world, and the world was made by him, and the world knew him not. 11. He came unto his own, and his own received him not. 12. 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: 13. Which were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.

6.--[*There was a man sent from God, ...John.*] This is a short and striking description of John the Baptist. He was the messenger whom God promised to send before Messiah's face. He was born when his parents were aged, by God's miraculous interposition. He was filled with the Holy Ghost from his mother's womb. He received a special commission from God to preach the baptism of repentance, and to proclaim the immediate coming of Christ. In short, he was specially raised up by God to prepare the way for the Messiah. For all these reasons he is here called "a man sent from God." It is, in one sense, the common mark of all true ministers of the Gospel. Ignorant, blind, and unconverted ministers may be ordained and sent by man. But they are not "sent from God."

7.--[*Came for a witness.*] This does not mean, as it might at first sight appear, "came to be a witness." The Greek word which we translate "witness," does not mean "a person," but the testimony which a witness bears.

[*To bear witness of the Light.*] This means, to testify concerning Jesus Christ the Light of the world, that He was the promised Messiah, the Lamb of God, the Bridegroom, the Almighty Saviour, to whom all dark souls ought to apply.

[*All men.*] This cannot of course signify "all mankind." It means all who heard John's testimony, and all Jews who were really looking for a Redeemer. One end of John the Baptist's testimony was, that all such should believe on Christ the true Light.

[*Through him.*] This does not mean "through Christ" and Christ's grace, but through John the Baptist and John's testimony. It is one of those texts which show the immense importance of the ministerial office. It is a means and instrument through which the Holy Spirit is pleased to produce faith in man's heart. "Faith cometh by hearing." Through John the Baptist's testimony, Andrew was led to believe in Jesus and become a disciple. Just so now, through the preaching of ministers sinners learn to believe on Christ and are saved.

8.--[*He was not that Light.*] This expression would be more literally rendered, "He was not *the* Light," the promised light of sinners, the light of the world. The Greek article "the," is used in a similar emphatic manner, to denote eminence and distinction, in the following passages. "That bread." (John vi.32.) "That prophet." (John i.21-25.) "That day." (1 Thess. v.4.) "That way." (Acts ix.2.)

Let it be noted that our Lord himself calls John the Baptist at a later period, "the burning and shining light." (John v.35.) But it is a curious fact that the Greek word there rendered "light," is not the one used here. It is a word which is frequently translated "candle." John the Baptist was a "candle," but not the Light itself. Believers are called "the light of the world" (Matt. v.14), but only as members of Christ the Light, and borrowing light from Him. Christ alone is the great sun and fountain of all light, the Light itself.

9.--[*That was the true Light.*] The force of the expression "true" in this sentence, is well brought out by Arrowsmith in his commentary on this verse. He says that Christ is "the true Light" in four respects. Firstly, He is undeceiving light, the true light in opposition to all the false lights of the Gentiles. Secondly, He is real light, true in opposition to ceremonial types and shadows. Thirdly, He is underived light, true in opposition to all light that is borrowed, communicated, or participated from another. Fourthly, He is supereminent light, true in opposition to all that is ordinary and common.

[*Which lights every man...comes...world.*] This sentence has caused much difference of opinion among commentators, in respect to two points.

(a) In the first place, men differ as to the application of the words, "that comes into the world." Some connect these words with "the true Light," and read the words, "this is the true light that coming into the world lighteth every man." In favour of this view, the words "light is come into the world" (John iii.19), and "I am come a light into the world" (John xii.46), deserve notice. Others connect the words with "every man," and regard them as a sweeping description of every one naturally born of the seed of Adam. That "coming into the world" is a Hebrew phrase for being born, is shown by Nifanius. The construction of the whole verse in the original Greek, is such that either rendering is grammatical and correct.

Opinions are so nicely balanced on this point, and so much may be said on either side, that I venture my own judgment with much hesitation. But I am inclined to think on the whole, with Chemnitius and Glassius, that our translators are right, and that the clause "that comes into the world," is better connected with "every man" than with "the true light." If the verse is rendered "this is the true light that coming into the world lighteth every man," it seems rather to narrow the blessing of the true light, and to confine His illumining benefits to the times after His incarnation. This, be it remembered, is precisely the view of the Socinian. And yet it

is unquestionably true that Christ's incarnation increased greatly the spiritual light in the world. St. John says, "The darkness is past and the true light now shineth." (1 John ii.8.) If, on the other hand, the verse is rendered as our version has it, the words "that comes into the world," seem very suitably joined to "every man," as expressing the universality of the blessings which Christ confers on man. He is not only the true light of the Jew, but of "every man that is born into the world," of every name, and people, and tongue. To suppose, as some have done, that this application of the words "come into the world," involves the pre-existence of souls, is, to say the least, a foolish thought.

The point is, happily, one on which men may agree to differ. Sound doctrine may be got out of either view.

(b) The second difference of opinion respecting this verse arises from the words, "lights every man." This expression has received widely different interpretations. All, except heretics, are agreed that the words cannot mean that all are converted, and cannot signify the final, universal salvation of all mankind. What then do they mean?

Some think, as Cyril, that Christ "the true light," lights every man and woman on earth with the light of reason, intelligence, and consciousness of right and wrong. This view is partially true, and yet it seems weak and defective.

Some think, as the Quakers are reported to do, that Christ lights every man and woman on earth with an inward light of grace, sufficient to save him, if he will only use it. This view is a dangerous one, and beside contradicting many texts of Scripture, leads on to downright Pelagianism.

Some think, as Augustine, that Christ lights all that are lighted by His grace, and that "every man" is practically the same as every believer. They quote in support of this view, the verse, "The Lord upholdeth all that fall" (Psalm cxlv.141), where "all" can only mean, "all those that are upheld are upheld by the Lord." A favourite illustration of this view is the saying, that a schoolmaster "teaches all the boys in a town," that is, "all who are taught are taught by him." This interpretation, however, is not thoroughly satisfactory, and has an appearance of quibbling and unfairness about it.

Some think, as Chrysostom, and Brentius in his Homilies, and Lightfoot, that Christ is really given to be the light of all mankind. They think that when it is said, He "lights every man," it means that He shines sufficiently for the salvation of all mankind, both Jews and Gentiles (like the sun shining upon all creation), though the majority of men are so blinded by sin that they do not see Him. Yet Christ is for every man. "He lighteth all," says Chrysostom, "as far as in Him lies." "There is power and good will in the light," says Chemnitius, "to illumine all; but some love darkness rather than light." Arrowsmith says, "Christ doth dispense to every one light sufficient to leave him without excuse. But Christ doth not dispense to every one converting light sufficient to bring him to

salvation."

I believe this last view to be the most probable one, though I confess that it is not unattended by difficulties. But I rest in the conclusion that Christ is offered as a light to all the world, and that every one born into the world will prove at last to have been in some way indebted to Christ, even though not saved.

Pearce says of the Greek word rendered "lighteth," that, "in the Hebrew tongue that which is only intended to be done is often expressed as a thing actually done." He regards this expression before us as a similar one. He gives, as parallel instances, 1 Cor. x.33, "please," for "intend to please;" Gal. v.4, "Justified," for "intend to be justified;" and 1 John ii.26, "seduce," for "intend to seduce."

The Greek word rendered "lights" is used eleven times in the New Testament, and is translated "to give light, to light, to bring to light, to enlighten, to illuminate."

10.--[*He was in the world, etc...knew Him not.*] This verse describes the unbelief of the whole world before Christ's incarnation. He "was in the world" invisibly, before He was born of the Virgin Mary, as in the days of Noah. (1 Pet. iii.19.) He was to be seen in His works and in His providential government of all things, if men had only had eyes to see Him. And yet the very world which He had made, the work of His hands, did not acknowledge, believe, or obey Him. It knew Him not. At Athens, Paul found an altar "to the unknown God."

That the expression applies to Christ before His incarnation, and not after, is said by Lampe to be the unanimous opinion of Origen, Chrysostom, Augustine, Cyril, Theodoret, Beda, Theophylact, and Euthymius.

There is a striking similarity between the declaration of this verse and the contents of the latter part of the 1st chapter of the Epistle to the Romans. In fact the line of argument by which St. Paul shows the Gentiles to be guilty, in the first chapter of that epistle, and the Jews to be equally guilty and excuseless in the second chapter, is only a full exposition of what St. John here states briefly in two verses.

11.--[*He came unto His own,...received Him not.*] This verse describes the unbelief of the Jewish nation after the incarnation of Christ, and during His ministry among them. He came to a people who were peculiarly His own, by their redemption from Egypt, by their introduction into the land of Canaan, and by their possession of the law of Moses, and the covenants, and yet they did not believe on Him, or receive Him, but actually rejected and slew Him.

There is a peculiarity about the Greek words rendered "His own," in this verse, which ought not to be overlooked. The first "His own" is in the neuter gender, and means literally "His own things." The second "His own" is in the masculine gender, and means "His own men, servants, or subjects."

It is probably meant to show that our Lord came to a people whose land, territory, cities, temple, were all His own property, and had been originally granted by Himself. The Jews, Palestine, Jerusalem, the temple, were all Christ's peculiar possession. Israel was "His inheritance." (Psalm lxxviii.71.) This made the sin of those who "received Him not," even more sinful.

12.--[*As many as received Him.*] This expression signifies, "as many as believed on Christ, and acknowledged Him as the Messiah." It is only another form of the expression at the end of the verse, "believed on His name." To receive Christ is to accept Him with a willing heart, and to take Him as our Saviour. It is one of many forms of speech, by which that justifying faith which unites the sinner's soul to Christ is expressed in the Bible. To believe on Christ with the heart, is to receive Him, and to receive Him is to believe on Him. St. Paul says to the Colossians, "As ye have received Christ, so walk ye in Him." (Col. ii.6.)

The Greek word rendered, "As many as," is literally, "whosoever," "whatsoever persons." Glassius remarks that the expression denotes the universality of the benefits which Christ conferred. "Whosoever" received Him, Pharisees, Sadducees, learned or unlearned, male or female, Jews or Gentiles, to them He gave the privilege of sonship to God.

[*To them gave He power to become the sons of God.*] This expression means, "He gave them the privilege of adoption into God's family." They became the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus." (Gal. iii.26.) "Whosoever believeth that Jesus is the Christ is born of God." (1 John v.1.) There is no sonship to God without living faith in Christ. Let this never be forgotten. To talk of God being men's Father, and men being God's children, while they do not believe on the Son of God, is contrary to Scripture. Those are not children of God who have not faith in Jesus.

The word "power" in this sentence requires careful guarding against misrepresentation. It means, as the marginal reading says, "right or privilege." It does not mean strength or ability. It does not mean that Christ confers on those who receive Him a spiritual and moral strength, by which they convert themselves, change their own hearts, and make themselves God's children. No doubt Christ gives to all His people all needful grace to supply all the wants of their hearts, and the necessities of their position. No doubt He gives them strength to carry the cross, fight the good fight, and overcome the world. But that is not the truth taught in the words before us, and must be sought in other places. The words before us only mean that Christ confers the privilege of adoption on all believers, and did so especially on His first disciples. While their unbelieving fellow-countrymen were boasting of being children of Abraham, Christ gave His disciples the far higher privilege of being children of God.

The Greek word rendered "power" is used 102 times in the New Testament, and never on one occasion in the sense of physical, moral, or spiritual strength to do a thing. It is generally translated, "authority, right,

power, liberty, jurisdiction."

[*To them that believe on His name.*] These words are added to make clearer, if possible, the character of those who have the privilege of being sons of God. They are they who receive Christ and believe on His name. Arrowsmith remarks, "The word 'name,' in the Scripture, is often put for person. The receivers of Christ are said to believe on His name, because the direct object of their faith is the person of Christ. It is not the believing that Christ died for all, or for me, or for the elect, or any such proposition, that saveth. It is believing on Christ. The person, or name of Christ, is the object of faith."

The expression, "believe on His name," ought not to be overlooked. Arrowsmith remarks that there is a known distinction amongst divines, between believing God, that there is such a Being,--believing God, that what He says is true,--and believing on God in the way of faith and confidence as our God. And he observes, most truly, that precisely the same distinction exists between faith that there is such a Saviour as Christ,--faith that what Christ says is true, and faith of reliance on Christ as our Saviour. Believing on Christ's name is exactly this faith of reliance, and is the faith that saves and justifies.

13.--[*Which were born, etc...of God.*] The birth here spoken of is the new birth, or regeneration, that complete change of heart and nature which takes place in a man when he becomes a real Christian. It is a change so great that no other figure but that of birth can fully express it. It is as when a new being, with new appetites, wants, and desires is brought into the world. A person born of God is "a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new." (2 Cor. v.17.)

The persons who believe on Christ's name are said to be born "not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God." The interpretation of this expression which is usually given by commentators appears to me neither correct nor seemly. The true meaning of the words, I believe, is this. Believers did not become what they are "by blood,"--that is, by descent from Abraham or blood connection with godly people; grace does not descend from parent to child. Nor yet did believers become what they are by the will of the flesh,--that is, by the efforts and exertions of their own natural hearts; nature can never change itself. "That which is born of the flesh is flesh." Nor yet did believers become what they are by the will of man,--that is, by the acts and deeds of others; neither ordained ministers nor anyone else can confer grace upon another. Man cannot regenerate hearts. Believers become what they are solely and entirely by the grace of God. It is to God's free grace, preventing, calling, converting, renewing and sanctifying, that they owe their new birth. They are born of God, or, as the third chapter says more distinctly, "born of the Spirit."

The word which we render "blood," in the singular number, is, in the Greek, plural, "bloods." This peculiarity has made some conjecture that the expression refers to the blood shed in circumcision and sacrifice, and

teaches the inability of these things to regenerate man. But this idea seems far-fetched and improbable. The use of the plural number appears to me intended to exclude all fleshly confidence in *any* descent or relationship. It was neither the blood of Abraham, nor of David, nor of Aaron, nor of Judah, nor of Levi, which would give grace or make anyone a child of God.

This is the first time the new birth is spoken of by name in Scripture. Let us not fail to notice how carefully the doctrine is fenced against errors, and how emphatically we are told what this new birth does *not* come from, as well as what it *does* come from. It is a striking fact that when St. Peter mentions the new birth, he fences it in like manner (1 Pet. i.23), and when he speaks of baptism "saving" us, he carefully adds that it is "not the putting away the filth of the flesh." (1 Pet. iii.21.) In the face of all these cautions, it is curious to observe the pertinacity with which many overthrow the whole doctrine of the new birth by the assertion that all baptized persons are born again!

We must be careful that we do not interpret the words "which were born" as if the new birth was a change which takes place in a man *after* he has believed in Christ, and is the next step *after* faith. Saving faith and regeneration are inseparable. The moment that a man really believes in Christ, however feebly, he is born of God. The weakness of his faith may make him unconscious of the change, just as a new-born infant knows little or nothing about itself. But where there is faith there is always new birth, and where there is no faith there is no regeneration.