

J. C. RYLE'S NOTES ON THE GOSPEL OF JOHN
8:12-20

12. Then Jesus spoke to them again, saying, I am the light of the world. He who follows me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life. 13. The Pharisees therefore said to him, You bear witness of yourself; your witness is not true. 14. Jesus answered and said to them, Though I bear witness of myself, *yet* my witness is true, for I know where I came from and where I am going; but ye do not know where I come from and where I am going. 15. Ye judge according to the flesh; I judge no man. 16. And yet if I judge, my judgment is true; for I am not alone, but I *am* with the Father who sent me. 17. It is also written in your law that the testimony of two men is true. 18. I am one who bears witness of myself, and the Father who sent me bears witness of me. 19. Then they said to him, Where is your Father? Jesus answered, Ye neither know me nor my Father. If ye had known me, ye should have known by Father also. 20. These words Jesus spoke in the treasury, as he taught in the temple; and no man laid hands on him, for his hour had not yet come.

Before beginning the notes on this section, I will ask anyone who doubts the genuineness of the first eleven verses of the chapter to consider how very awkwardly the twelfth verse would come in if it immediately followed the 52nd verse of the seventh chapter. The omission of the disputed passage about the woman taken in adultery, however necessary some may think it, undoubtedly makes a breach in the connection which cannot be reasonably explained. *Omit* the passage, and our Lord appears to break in upon the angry council of the Pharisees, foiled in their attempt to take Him and vexed with Nicodemus for pleading for Him. This is surely very improbable, to say the least. *Retain* the disputed passage, on the other hand, and the whole connection seems plain. A night has passed away. A sunrise is over the whole party assembled in the temple court. And our Lord begins again to teach by proclaiming a beautiful truth appropriate to the occasion: "I am the light of the world."

12.--[*Then Jesus spoke to them again.*] The expression "spoke again" exactly fits in with the preceding narrative. It carries us back to the 2nd verse, where we read that our Lord was sitting in the temple and teaching the people when the woman taken in adultery was brought before Him. This, naturally, interrupted and broke off His teaching for a time. But when the case was settled and both accuser and accused had gone away, He resumed His teaching. Then the expression comes in most naturally, "He spoke again." Once admit that the narrative of the woman is not genuine and must be left out, and there is really nothing with which to connect the words before us. We are obliged to look back as far as the 37th verse of the last chapter.

The same remark applies to the word "them." The natural application of it is to "the people" whom our Lord was teaching in the 2nd verse when the Scribes and Pharisees interrupted Him. Leave out the narrative of the

woman, and there is nothing to which the word "them" can be referred except the angry council of the Pharisees at the end of the seventh chapter.

[*I am the light of the world.*] In this glorious expression our Lord, we cannot doubt, declares Himself to be the promised Messiah or Savior of whom the prophets had spoken. The Jews would remember the words, "I will give Thee for a light of the Gentiles." (Isa. xlii.6, xlix.6.) So also Simeon had said He would be "a light to lighten the Gentiles." (Luke ii.32.) Why He used this figure and what He had in His mind in choosing it, is a point on which commentators do not agree. That He referred to something before His eyes is highly probable and in keeping with His usual mode of teaching.

(1) Some think, as Aretius, Musculus, Ecolampadius, Bullinger, and Bp. Andrews, that He referred to the sun, then rising while He spoke. What the sun was to the earth, that He came to be to mankind.

(2) Some think, as Stier, Olshausen, Besser, D. Brown, and Alford, that He referred to the great golden lamps which used to be kept burning in the temple courts. He was the true light, able to enlighten men's hearts and minds; they were nothing but ornaments, or at most, emblems.

(3) Some think, as Cyril and Lampe, that He referred to the pillar of cloud and fire which gave light to the Israelites and guided them through the wilderness. He was the true guide to heaven through the wilderness of this world.

The first of these three views seems to me most probable and most in harmony with the context.

Rupertus remarks that two grand declarations of Christ followed each other on two successive days at Jerusalem. On the last day of the feast He said, "If any man thirst, let him come to Me and drink." (John vii.37.) The very next day He said, "I am the light of the world."

[*He who follows Me.*] This means "following" as a disciple, servant, traveler, soldier, or sheep. What the teacher is to the scholar, the master to the servant, the guide to the traveler, the general to the soldier, the shepherd to the sheep, that is Christ to true Christians. "Following" is the same as "believing." See Matt. xvi.24, xix.21, John x.27, xii.26. Following here, we must always remember, does not mean copying and imitating, but trusting, putting faith in another.

Musculus and Henry observe that it is of no use that Christ is the light of the world if we do not follow Him. "Following" is the point on which all turns. It is not enough to gaze upon and admire the light. We must "follow" it.

[*Shall not walk in darkness.*] The expression "darkness" in the New Testament sometimes denotes sin, as 1 John i.6, and sometimes ignorance and unbelief, as 1 Thes. v.4. Some have thought that our Lord referred to the woman taken in adultery and to such deeds of moral darkness as she had been guilty of. The meaning would then be, "He who follows Me and becomes my disciple shall be delivered from the power of darkness and shall no longer

commit such sins as you have just heard of." Others, on the contrary, think that our Lord only referred to the intellectual darkness and ignorance of man's mind, which He had come to illuminate. The meaning would then be, "He who follows Me as my disciple shall no longer live in ignorance and darkness about his soul." I decidedly prefer this second view. The promise seems to me to have a special reference to the ignorance in which the Jews were about everything concerning Christ, as shown in the preceding chapter.

[*Shall have the light of life.*] This expression means, "He shall possess living light. He shall have spiritual light, as much superior to the light of any lamp or even of the sun, as the living water offered to the Samaritan woman was superior to the water of Jacob's well." The spiritual light that Christ gives is independent of time or place, is not affected by sickness or death, burns on forever and cannot be quenched. He who has it shall feel light within his mind, heart, and conscience; shall see light before him on the grave, death, and the world to come; shall have light shining round him, guiding him in his journey through life, and shall reflect light by his conduct, ways, and conversation.

Chrysostom thinks that one purpose of this promise was to draw on and encourage Nicodemus, and to remind him of the former saying Jesus had used about light and darkness, John iii.20,21.

Augustine remarks on this verse: "What it is our duty to do, Christ puts in the present tense; what He promises to them that do it, He has denoted by a future time. He who follows *now* shall have *hereafter*, who follows now by faith shall have hereafter by sight. When by sight? When we shall have come to the vision yonder; when this night of ours shall have passed away." I should be sorry, however, to confine the promise to so limited an interpretation as this; and though I have no doubt it will only be completely fulfilled at the second advent, I still think that it is partially and spiritually fulfilled now to every believer.

Calvin remarks, that in this verse "Benefit is offered not only to one person or another, but to the whole world. By this universal statement, Christ intended to remove the distinction not only between Jews and Gentiles but between learned and ignorant, between persons of distinction and common people." He also says, "In the latter clause of the verse, the perpetuity of light is stated in express terms. We ought not to fear, therefore, lest it leave us in the middle of our journey."

Brentius remarks that if a man could continually "follow" the sun, he would always be in broad daylight in every part of the globe. So it is with Christ and believers. Always following Him, they will always have light.

In this most precious and interesting verse, there are several things which deserve our special attention.

(a) We should note the great assumed truth which lies underneath the whole verse. That truth is the fall of man. The world is in a state of moral and spiritual darkness. Men in their natural state know nothing rightly of themselves, God, holiness, or heaven. They need light.

(b) We should note the full and bold manner of our Lord's declaration. He proclaims Himself to be "the light of the world." None could truly say this but One, who knew that He was very God. No Prophet or Apostle ever said it.

(c) We should note how our Lord says that He is "the light of the world." He is not for a few only, but for all mankind. Like the sun, He shines for the benefit of all, though all may not value or use His light.

(d) We should note the man to whom the promise is made. It is to him "who follows Me." To follow a leader--if we are blind, ignorant, in the dark, or out of the way--requires trust and confidence. This is just what the Lord Jesus requires of sinners who feel their sins and want to be saved. Let them commit themselves to Christ, and He will lead them safe to heaven. If a man can do nothing for himself, he cannot do better than trust another and follow him.

(e) We should note the thing promised to him who follows Jesus: viz., deliverance from darkness and possession of light. This is precisely what Christianity brings to a believer. He feels, and sees, and has a sense of possessing something he had not before. God "shines into his heart and gives light." He is "called out of darkness into marvelous light." (2 Cor. iv.4-6, 1 Pet. ii.9.)

Melancthon thinks that this verse is only a brief summary of what our Lord said, and must be regarded as the text or keynote of a long discourse.

Bullinger remarks how useful it is to commit to memory and store up great sentences and maxims of Christ, list this verse.

13.--[*The Pharisees therefore said to Him.*] These "Pharisees" were probably some of the multitude who had come together to hear our Lord's teaching, and not those who brought the woman taken in adultery to Him. The Pharisees were a powerful and widely-spread sect, and members of their body would be found in every crowd of hearers, ready to raise objections and find fault with anything our Lord said wherever they thought there was an opportunity.

[*You bear witness of Yourself.*] This would be more literally rendered, "You do witness about Yourself."

[*Your witness is not true.*] This means, "Your testimony is not trustworthy and deserving of attention." The Pharisees evidently could not mean "Your testimony is false." They only meant that it was an acknowledged principle among men that a man's testimony to his own character is comparatively worthless. Our Lord Himself had admitted this on a former occasion, when He said before the Council, "If I bear witness of myself, my witness is not true." (John v.31.) Solomon had said, "Let another praise thee and not thine own mouth; a stranger, and not thine own lips." (Prov. xxvii.2.)

14.--[*Jesus answered...though I bear witness...true.*] Our Lord meant by these words that even if He did testify of Himself and make assertions

about His own office and mission, His testimony ought not to be despised and disregarded as not trustworthy. Whether His enemies would hear it or not, what He said deserved credit and was worthy of all acceptance. "The testimony that I bear is not the testimony of a common witness, but of one who is thoroughly to be depended on."

[*For I know where I came from, etc.*] Our Lord here gives a solemn and weighty reason why His testimony to Himself ought to be reverently received by the Jews and not refused. That reason was His divine nature and mission. He came to them and stood before them not as a common prophet and an everyday witness, but as one who knew the mysterious truth that He was the Divine Messiah who should come into the world. "I know where I came from: I came forth from the Father to be His Messenger to a lost world. I know where I go: I am about to return to my Father when I have finished His work, and to sit down at His right hand after my ascension. Knowing all this, I have a right to say that my testimony is trustworthy. You, on the other hand, are utterly ignorant about Me. You neither know nor believe My Divine origin nor mission. Justly, therefore, I may say that it matters little whether you think my testimony deserving of credit or not. Your eyes are blinded, and your opinion is worthless."

Chrysostom observes that our Lord "might have said, I am God. But He ever mingles lowly words with sublime, and even these He veils."

Bucer, Chemnitius, and Quesnel observe that our Lord's argument is like that of an ambassador from a king, who says, "I know my commission and who sent Me, and therefore I claim attention to my message."

Webster paraphrases the sentence: "I speak in the full consciousness of my previous and future existence in the glory of the Father; and I therefore feel and assert my right to be believed on my own testimony. If you knew where I came from and where I go, you would not want any other witness than myself. And this you might know if you were spiritual; but you are carnal and judge after the flesh."

15.--[*Ye judge after the flesh.*] The meaning of this sentence seems to be, "You judge and decide everything on fleshly and worldly principles, according to the outward appearance. You estimate Me and my mission according to what you see with the eye. You presume to despise Me and set light by Me, because there is no outward grandeur and dignity about Me. Judging everything by such a false standard, you see no beauty in Me and my ministry. You have already set Me down in your own minds as an impostor, and worthy to die. Your minds are full of carnal prejudices, and hence my testimony seems worthless to you."

Calvin thinks that "flesh" is here used in opposition to "spirit," and that the meaning is, "You judge on carnal wicked principles;" and not, "You judge after the outward appearance. Most commentators think that the expression refers to our Lord's humble appearance.

[*I judge no man.*] In these words our Lord puts in strong contrast the difference between Himself and His enemies. "Unlike you, I condemn and pass judgment on no man, even on the worst of sinners. It is not my

present business and office, though it will be one day. I did not come into the world to condemn, but to save." (John iii.17.) It is useless, however, to deny that the connection between the beginning and end of the verse is not clear. It seems to turn entirely on the twice-repeated word "judge," and the word appears to be used in two different senses.

Some have thought that our Lord refers to the case of the woman taken in adultery and contrasts His own refusal to be a judge in her case with the malicious readiness of the Pharisees to judge Him and condemn Him even when innocent. "I refuse to condemn even a guilty sinner. You, on the contrary, are ready to condemn Me in whom you can find no fault, on carnal and worldly principles."

Some, as Bullinger, Jansenius, Trapp, Stier, Gill, Pearce, and Barnes, have thought that the sentence before us means, "I judge no man according to the flesh, as you do." But this view does not seem to harmonize with the following verse.

Bishop Hall paraphrases the verse thus: "Ye presume to judge according to your own carnal affections and follow your outward senses in the judgment ye pass on Me. In the meantime ye will not endure Me, who do not challenge or reconcile that power which I might in judging you."

16.--[*And yet if I judge, my judgment, etc.*] This verse seems to come in parenthetically. It appears intended to remind the Jews that if our Lord did not assume the office of a judge now, it was not because He was not qualified. The sense is as follows: "Do not however suppose, because I say that I judge no man, that I am not qualified to judge. On the contrary, if I do pass judgment on any person's actions or opinions, my judgment is perfectly correct and trustworthy. For I am not alone. There is an inseparable union between Me and the Father who sent Me. When I judge, it is not I alone, but the Father with Me who judges. Hence, therefore, my judgment is and must be trustworthy." The reader should compare John v.19 and 30. The doctrine is the same. That mighty truth--the inseparable union of the Father and the Son--is the only key that unlocks the deep expression before us. Our Lord's frequent reference to that truth, in St. John's Gospel, should be carefully noted.

17.--[*It is also written, etc.*] Our Lord, in this verse, reminds the Jews of an admitted principle of the law of Moses--that the testimony of two witnesses deserved credit. (Deut. xvii.6, xix.15.) "You will admit that the testimony of two witnesses deserves credit at any rate, although one witness alone may prove nothing. Now admitting this, hear what testimony I can adduce to the divine character of my mission."

Let it be noted that where our Lord says "in *your* law," He did not mean that He was above the law and did not recognize its authority. He only intended, by laying stress on the word "your," to remind the Jews that it was their own honored law of Moses (to which they were continually professing to refer) that laid down the great principle to which He was about to direct their attention. "It is written in the law that *you* speak of so much, and that *you* so often quote."

It admits of consideration whether our Lord did not mean to use the expression "of two men" emphatically. It may be that He would put in strong contrast the testimony of two mere *men*, with the testimony of Himself and His Father in heaven. It is like the expression, "If we receive the witness of men, the witness of God is greater." (1 John v.9.) At any rate, the word rendered "men" is emphatic in the Greek.

18.--[*I am one, etc.*] The connection and sense of this verse are as follows: "Admitting that the testimony of two witnesses is trustworthy, I bid you observe that there are two witnesses to my Divine nature and mission. I myself, the Eternal Son, am one of these witnesses; I am ever testifying concerning myself. The Father who sent Me into the world is the other witness; He is ever testifying concerning Me. He has testified by the mouth of the Prophets in the Old Testament. He is testifying now by the miraculous works which He is continually doing by my hands. The reader should compare John v.31-39.

There is undeniably something very remarkable about this verse. It seems a singular condescension on our Lord's part to use the train of argument that it contains. The true solution probably lies in the very high dignity of the two witnesses, whom He places together before the Jews. The Greek words beginning the verse are peculiar and can hardly be rendered in English. They will almost bear to be translated, "I, the great I am, am the person witnessing about myself; and the Father," etc.

Chrysostom and Theophylact both remark that our Lord here claims equality of honor with the Father by putting His testimony and the Father's side by side.

Poole remarks: "Our Savior must not be understood here to distinguish himself from His Father in respect of His Divine being, for so He and His Father are one; but in respect of His office as He was sent, and His Father was He who sent Him."

19.--[*Then they said...Where is your Father?*] This question of the Jews was probably not asked in a tone of serious inquiry or from real desire to know. It was more likely sneering and sarcastic.

Calvin observes: "By these words they meant that they did not so highly value Christ's Father as to ascribe anything to the Son on His account."

Hengstenberg bids us observe that they did not ask, "Who is thy Father?" but, "Where is thy Father?" It sounds as if they looked round in contempt, as if scornfully expecting an earthly father to stand forth and testify to Christ.

[*Jesus answered, Ye neither know Me nor my Father.*] Our Lord here tells His enemies that they were ignorant both of Himself and of His Father in heaven. With all their pride of knowledge and fancied high attainments, they knew nothing rightly either of the Father or the Son. The expression certainly favors the idea that the expression "Ye know Me" (John vii.28), must be taken as a slight sarcasm.

Let it be noted that great familiarity with the letter of Scripture is perfectly compatible with gross spiritual darkness. The Pharisees knew the Old Testament prophecies well; but they neither knew God nor Christ.

[*If ye had known Me...my Father also.*] These words teach plainly that ignorance of Christ and ignorance of God are inseparably connected. The man who thinks he knows anything rightly of God while he is ignorant of Christ is completely deceived. The God whom he thinks he knows is not the God of the Bible, but a God of his own fancy's invention. At any rate, he can have a most imperfect conception of God but little idea of His perfect holiness, justice, and purity. The words teach also that Christ is the way by which we must come to the knowledge of God. In Him, through Him, and by Him, we may come boldly into the Father's presence and behold His high attributes without fear.

He who would have saving, soul-satisfying religion and become a friend and servant of God, must begin with Christ. Knowing Him as his Savior and Advocate, he will find it easy and pleasant to know God the Father. Those who reject Christ, like the Jews, will live and die in ignorance of God however learned and clever they may be. But the poorest, humblest man who lays hold on Christ and begins with Him, shall find out enough about God to make him happy forever. In the matter of becoming acquainted with God, it is the first step to know Jesus Christ, the Mediator, and to believe on Him.

Augustine and others think that the thought here is the same as that in the words spoken to Philip, when in reply to Philip's question ("Lord, show us the Father"), Jesus said, "He who has seen Me has seen the Father." (John xiv.8,9.) I think this is at least doubtful. The thing that Philip needed to know was the precise relation between the Father and the Son. The thing that the Jews needed was a right knowledge of God altogether.

20.--[*These words spoke Jesus...temple.*] This sentence seems meant to mark a pause or break in the discourse, and to show also how publicly and openly our Lord proclaimed His Messiahship. It was in a well known part of the temple called the treasury that He declared Himself to be "the light of the world," and defended His testimony.

Calvin thinks that "the treasury was a part of the temple where the sacred offerings were laid up, and therefore a much frequented place."

[*No man laid hands on Him.*] The remark made on a former occasion applies here. (John vii.30.) A divine restraint was laid on our Lord's enemies. They felt unable to lift a finger against Him. They had the will to hurt, but not the power.

[*His hour had not yet come.*] The same deep thought that we remarked in ch. vii.30 comes up here again. There was a certain fixed time during which our Lord's ministry was to last, and till that time was expired His enemies could not touch Him. When the time had expired, our Lord said, "This is your hour, and the power of darkness." (Luke xxii.53.)

The expression should be carefully noticed and remembered by all true

Christians. It teaches that the wicked can do no harm to Christ and His members until God gives them permission. Not a hair of a believer's head can be touched until God in His sovereign wisdom allows it. It teaches that all times are in God's hand. There is an allotted "hour" both for doing and for suffering. Till the hour comes for dying, No Christian will die. When the hour comes, nothing can prevent his death. These are comfortable truths and deserve attention. Christ's members are safe and immortal till their work is done. When they suffer, it is because God wills it and sees it good.

Quesnel remarks: "A man enjoys the greatest peace of mind when he has once settled himself in a firm and steadfast belief of God's providence and an absolute dependence upon His design and will."