

The Character of Jesus

Charles Edward Jefferson

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

“Behold the Man!” John 19:5

Let us think together on these Sunday evenings of the Character of Jesus. You will observe the limitation of the subject. Jesus alone is too great a theme to be dealt with in a course of lectures. There are, for instance, the Ideas of Jesus, the principles which he enunciated in his sermons and illustrated in his parables. This is a great field, and fascinating, but into it we cannot at present go. The Doctrines of Jesus, the things he taught of God and the soul, of life and death, of duty and destiny: this also is another field spacious and rewarding, but into it we cannot enter. We might think of the Person of Jesus, meditate upon his relations to the Father, and to the Holy Spirit, and to us, and ponder the immeasurable mystery of his personality—this is what thoughtful minds have ever loved to do. But upon this vast field of thought we also turn our backs in order that we may give ourselves undividedly to the Character of Jesus. By “character” I mean the sum of the qualities by which Jesus is distinguished from other men. His character is the sum total of his characteristics, his moral traits, the features of his mind and heart and soul. We are to think about his quality, his temper, his disposition, the stamp of his genius, the notes of his spirit, and the form of his conduct. In one sense our studies will be elementary. We are to deal with the ABC’s of Christian learning. This is the logical beginning of all earnest study into the meaning of the Christian religion. Before we are rightly prepared to listen to the ideas of Jesus we must know something of what Jesus is. The significance of what a man says depends largely upon what he is. Two men may say precisely the same thing; but if one is known to be a fool, his words make no impression on us; if the other is known to be wise and good we give him close and sympathetic attention. A man is better able to appreciate the ideas of Jesus if he first of all becomes acquainted with Jesus’ character.

To begin with the character of Jesus is to adopt the scientific method of study. The scientist of today insists upon studying phenomena. What he wants is data, and from these he will draw his conclusions. No scientist can begin his work unless put in possession of definite and concrete facts. There is a general opinion abroad that Christianity is something very much in the air. It is vague and nebulous, cloudy and indeterminate, something beautiful as the mist with the morning sun playing on it, but also like the mist very thin and high above the world in which men live. But in this course of lectures I do not ask you to think about visions or conceptions, principles or relations; I call your attention to a few definite and clean-cut facts. This man Jesus was an historic character. He lived his life upon this earth. In his passage from the cradle to the grave he manifested certain traits and dispositions which it is our purpose to study. If we were to attempt to deal with all his sayings, we should find many of them hard to understand, and if we should attempt to grapple with his personality, we should find ourselves face to face with mysteries too deep to be fathomed; but in dealing with his character we are handling something concrete and comprehensible. Let us place ourselves before him and permit him to make upon us whatsoever impression he will.

Not only is this the scientific method, it is also the New Testament method. It was just in this manner that the disciples came to know Jesus. They did not begin with the mystery of his person, nor did they begin with sayings which were hard for them to understand. They began simply by coming near him, looking at him with their eyes, listening to him with their ears. It is with a shout of exultation that the beloved apostle in the first of his letters says, "We handled him with our hands." It would seem from the New Testament that Jesus desires men to come to the truth which he is to give to the world by a knowledge of his character. When two young men one day followed him along the bank of the Jordan, and he turned upon them and said: "Whom are you looking for?" and they replied, "Where do you live?" his answer was, "Come and see." They remained with him for the rest of the day, and the result of their first meeting was that they wanted their comrades to come and see him also. And from that day to this the cause of Christianity has advanced in the world simply because those who have already seen him have wanted others to come and share their experience.

If this was the method of approach to Christianity in the first century, why is it not the best approach for our time? Christianity in the course of its development has taken on many forms and has gathered up into itself many things which are nonessential. The result is that thousands are bewildered, not knowing what to think or what to do. Many have been

offended by Christianity because they have attempted to enter it through the ecclesiastical door. They have come to the religion of Jesus through some professing Christian who has been inconsistent or hypocritical, and simply one such disastrous experience is sufficient sometimes to keep a man away from Christ through his entire life. Sometimes it is no individual Christian, but the local church as a body that gives the offense. It may be that the church is dead or that its leading men are corrupt or that its preacher is ignorant and does not have the Christian spirit or the Christian outlook; in which case the total impression made by the church is disastrous, and the soul is repelled. There are many men who are not Christians today because it was their peculiar misfortune to come at a critical period in their life in contact with a church which was lacking in Christian sympathy and devotion. There are others who have attempted to get into Christianity through the dogmatic door. They have come to the dogmatic statements of the Christian church, the doctrines formulated by church councils and theologians, and by these they have been offended. Their reason has been repelled and their heart has been chilled. Let me suggest that there is another door: the character of Jesus. Neither professing Christians nor dogmatic statements are the door of the Christian religion. The founder of Christianity says: "I am the Door." It may be that some man in the congregation who has been made cynical by professing Christians, or skeptical by church dogmas may find that he is neither skeptical nor cynical after he has studied the character of Jesus. For after all, to be a Christian is not to be like other professing Christians, or to accept ecclesiastical propositions; to be a Christian is to admire Jesus so sincerely, and so fervently that the whole life goes out to him in an aspiration to be like him.

This is a very opportune time in which to study the character of Jesus because it is in our day and generation that he has appeared with new glory before the eyes of the world. We who are now living can know him, if we will, better than he has ever been known since the days of the apostles. There have been three stupendous pieces of work accomplished within the last seventy years. Two of them are well known to everybody, the third is recognized by comparatively few. The first magnificent accomplishment of the last seventy years is the construction of the palace of science. This great enterprise has been carried forward by a host of men of genius who have thrown into their work the heroism of prophets and the enthusiasm of apostles. Almost the entire structure of the palace of science has been built up within the last seventy years. How glorious, how dazzling it is, I need not attempt to describe, for it has caught and holds the eyes of the world. The second great achievement of the last seventy years is the development of material civilization. Within these years have come the

steamship, the railroad, the telegraph, the telephone, and a thousand other inventions by means of which the face of the world has been transformed and the habits of men have been revolutionized. This is a miracle which is also known to all. But there is a third piece of work even more wonderful and more far-reaching in its effects than these other two, and that is the work which has been done by a great army of scholars on both sides of the sea in bringing Jesus of Nazareth out of the shadows and out of the clouds in which he had been hidden, and placing him once more before the world.

It was in 1835 that Strauss published his first edition of the "Life of Jesus," and from that day to this the world has been studying the character of the Man of Galilee with an interest which has been constantly deepening, and with a zeal that shows no abatement. The Gospels have been subjected to a scrutiny which has been given to no other writings. The libraries and the mounds and the tombs have been ransacked for manuscripts. The manuscripts have been brought together and carefully compared and each minutest variation has been noted and pondered. Every paragraph has been sifted and every sentence has been weighed, every word has been analyzed and every syllable has been examined and cross questioned. The amount of labor bestowed upon the New Testament within the last seventy years is amazing and incalculable. Men have not been contented with studying the manuscripts, they have studied the land in which Jesus lived; they have measured it from north to south and from east to west with a surveyor's chain. They have taken the heights of the hills and the mountains, and the depths of the rivers and seas. With pick and shovel, they have gone down into the earth in search of material to throw additional rays of light upon this man who has made the land "Holy." The first century of our era has been studied as no other century since time began. The customs of the people, their clothing, their houses, every feature of their social and political and ecclesiastical life, everything that they read and everything that they said, and everything that they did has been analyzed, discussed, explained, illustrated, photographed, and scattered broadcast in the hope that this might bring men closer to Jesus. The civilization of the first century in Palestine has been subjected to a scrutiny and analysis which no other civilization has ever known. The printing presses on both sides of the sea are flooding the world with books about the life and the times of Jesus. And the result is he looms colossal before the eyes of the world. It is not simply the church that sees him; all men can see him now. He has broken out of ecclesiastical circles; he walks through all cities and lands. All sorts and conditions of men have come to admire him. Those who despise the church respect him, those who deny Christian dogmas bow before him. The

great unchurched classes who care nothing for anthems or sermons break into applause at the mention of his name. Many of them see him dimly, many of them have caught only a glimpse of his face and his heart, but everybody knows that he is the man who went about doing good. Everywhere his name is revered. It is fitting that in these opening years of the new century we should endeavor to gain a clearer apprehension of the range of his mind and the reach of his heart.

How are we to get our information? There are six channels through which light will come. We may come to know him through the words he spoke, through the deeds he did, and also through his silences. We may know him also by the impression which he made first upon his friends and secondly upon his foes, and thirdly upon the general body of his contemporaries.

It awes me when I think of the great company that no man can number to which I ask you to join yourselves in this study of the character of Jesus. Let your mind roam over the last nineteen hundred years, and think of the artists who have stood before him, seeing in him new revelations of beauty; think of the poets who have stood before him and have caught inspiration for their songs; think of the musicians who have stood before him and who have worked the impression which he made upon them into tones which lift the heart and set it dreaming; think of the philosophers who have stood before him and meditated on the great ideas which found expression on his lips; think of the unlettered men and women, the great crowd of peasants, plain working people, descendants of the shepherds that heard the angels singing, who have bowed in adoration before him and found rest from their weariness and strength in their weakness. And then let your mind run out into the centuries that are coming and think of the countless generations of men and women who are still to stand before this matchless figure, drinking in inspiration with which to live their life and do their work. If you can see in your imagination this great procession which has been and the greater procession which is yet to be, you will take your places with reverent spirit as once again we attempt to study the character of the man who compels the heart to cry out, "Master!"

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