

The Character of Jesus

Charles Edward Jefferson

Chapter 2

REASONS FOR OUR STUDY

"Come and see," John 1:46

I invite you to contemplate with me the character of Jesus. Many of you have studied him under the leadership of others, come with me for a little interval and let us study him again. The time is ripe for a restudy of his character and career. We have fallen upon distracted and distracting days. The world is crying out for something, it scarce knows what. Wealth has come, but the heart is hungry; knowledge has come, but life for many has slipped into a riddle and delusion. The world is filled with the inventions of human skill and genius, but there is a vast emptiness which neither science nor art is able to fill.

One of the notes of twentieth century life is discontent. Some of us are discontented with ourselves. We are restless, unsatisfied, bewildered. We carry with us a consciousness of failure. We feel we are falling short of what we ought to be. Life in spite of our efforts is meager and disappointing. Loaded with many possessions we cry, "What lack I yet?" It may be wise, therefore, to turn aside from the path we have been traveling and listen for a season to Jesus of Nazareth. It may be that he has the secret for which we have been searching. On opening the New Testament the first face which fronts us is his and the first words which greet us come from his lips. He says, "Come unto me and I will give you rest; I am the bread of life; I am the Light of the world; If any man thirst let him come unto me and drink; My peace I give unto you; You shall receive power; You shall rejoice." Bread and water, light and rest and peace and power and joy, are these not the seven elemental blessings which make human life complete? If this man promises to give us the things which the soul most desires, it is worthwhile to study his method and find out, if we can, how his proffered gifts can be most speedily obtained. On approaching him we hear him saying: "Follow me! Learn of me! Abide in me!" It would seem that he offers us all good things on condition that we become

like him. But what is he like? What is his disposition, temper, attitude, nature? Surely all who are discontented with themselves will want to study the character of Jesus.

There are others of us who are discontented, not so much with ourselves as with the world. The time is out of joint, and we are sick at heart because no one seems to be wise or strong enough to set it right. Government is corrupt, the church seems dead or dying, the home is a failure or scandal, society is superficial and tainted, the social order is ready for the burning, the economic system is a burden and curse, the whole framework of the world needs to be reconstructed, and, alas, who is sufficient for so herculean a task? The men with panaceas are loudmouthed and confident, the prophets of reform are vociferous and ubiquitous, but unfortunately they do not agree among themselves, and the remedies when applied are impotent to cure. The medicines do not seem to be powerful enough, and the doctors stand by the bedside of feverish and delirious humanity, outwitted, discredited, dumfounded. Modern civilization has become a tower of Babel, and the air is so filled with theories of social amelioration and programs of industrial reorganization that the clearest headed are bewildered by the din and tumult, not knowing in which direction deliverance must be sought.

When we open our New Testament, we find a man looking at us who although not a professional revolutionist has been the cause of many revolutions, and who although not a disturber of the peace has repeatedly turned the world upside down. He is not numbered among the radicals because in his radicalism he outstrips them all. He dares to reverse all human standards, confounds the wise by things which are foolish and confounds things which are mighty by the things which are weak. He has much to say about authority and power, and it is his claim that he can make all things new. The writers of history have confessed that he overturned the Roman Empire and has given to Europe and America a civilization unlike any which the world has ever known. If his ideas have in them the force of dynamite, and if his personality has power to change the policy of empires and even the temper of the human heart, it may be that this man is the very man the modern world is looking for in its wild quest for a way of deliverance from its miseries and woes. Surely all of those who are sick of the world as it is and who long for the coming of a world which shall be better, must, if they are wise, come to Jesus of Nazareth for his secret of pulling down the strongholds of iniquity and establishing righteousness and peace in the earth.

When we study his method, we discover that his supreme concern is for the rightness of heart of the individual man. This molder of empires gives himself to the task of molding individual men. This arch revolutionist starts his conflagrations in the individual soul. He draws one man to him, infuses into him a new spirit, sends him after one other man, who in time goes after a third man, and this third man after a fourth, and thus does he weld a chain by means of which Caesar shall be dragged from his throne. Strange as it may seem, he has nothing to say about heredity, and stranger still nothing to say about environment. He keeps his eyes upon the soul, and by changing this he alters the environment and also the currents of the blood down through many generations. When we speak of environment, we think of the physical surroundings: the paving in the street, the sewerage, the architecture of the houses, and the lighting of the rooms. We are convinced that with better sewerage and better ventilation and better lighting the plague of humanity would be speedily abated. But this Reformer of Nazareth acts and speaks as though environment is not a matter of brick and plaster but rather of human minds and hearts. Men are made what they are, not by pavements and houses, but by the men among whom they live. Would you change the environment, then begin by a transformation of men; and would you transform men, then begin by a transformation of some particular man. It is by the changing of the character of a man that we change the character of other men, and by changing the character of many men we change the character of institutions and ultimately of empires and civilizations. When Jesus says, "Behold I make all things new," he lays his hand on the heart of a man. It is out of the heart that demons proceed which tear humanity to pieces, and it is out of the heart that the angels come which restore the beauty and peace of Paradise.

Here then is Jesus' own secret for making an old world over. He will introduce golden ages by giving individuals a character like his own. His character is a form of power mightier than the legions of Caesar or the wisdom of the greatest of the schools. We who are most discontented with the world and most eager to banish its tyrannies and abuses may profitably give our days and our nights to the study of the character of Jesus, for through this the burdened world is to pass forward into a brighter day. There are many fussy and noisy workers, many a blatant and spectacular leader, reformers are often plausible and dashing, and revolutionists impress us by their schemes of creating a world which is new, but after all there is no more effective worker for the world's redemption than the man or woman who in high or obscure places, strives, in season and out of season, to persuade men to conform their lives to the pattern presented to us in the character of Jesus; and no one is advancing so

swiftly toward the golden age as the man or woman who by prayer and daily effort endeavors to build up in mind and spirit the virtues and graces of the Man of Galilee.

Here then we find the supreme mission of the Christian clergyman: it is to help men to fall in love with the character of Jesus. The Bible is an invaluable book chiefly because it contains a portrait of Jesus. The New Testament is immeasurably superior to the Old because in the New Testament we have the face of Jesus. The holy of holies of the New Testament is the Gospels because it is here we look directly into the eyes of Jesus. We often speak of the Gospel: What is it? Jesus!

Let us come now a little closer and ask, "What is it in Jesus which is most worth our study?" A great deal of attention is being given to the circumstances which formed the framework of his earthly life. Many men are working on the chronology and others are at work on the geography, and others are interested in the robe and the turban and the sandals. Photographers have photographed every landscape on which he ever looked, and every scene connected with his work or career. Painters have transferred the Palestinian fields and lakes and skies to canvas, and stereopticon lecturers have made the Holy Land the most familiar spot on earth. Writers of many grades have flooded the world with descriptions of customs and houses, of fashions and ceremonies, and amid such a mass of drapery and upholstery we are in danger of losing the man Jesus. We may become so interested in the fringes and tassels of his outer life as to miss the secret which his heart has to tell. Many an hour has been spent upon the outer trappings of Jesus' life which might better have been employed in the earnest study of his mind and heart. Palestine has no interest for us except in so far as it assists us to understand what Jesus was and did. The temporal and local and provincial may be interesting, but it is not important. It is the character of Jesus which has unique and endless significance, and to this then every earnest mind and heart should turn. The pictures have no value unless they carry us deeper into the soul of the man.

It is surprising what meager materials we have to deal with in the study of Jesus. The New Testament writers were not interested in trifles. They cared nothing for his stature, the clothes he wore or the houses he lived in. He had none of the things which biographers are wont to expatiate upon to the extent of many chapters. He had no lineage to boast of. His friends were all obscure. He held no office either in church or state. He had no prestige of wealth and no repute for learning. He was born in a stable, worked in a carpenter's shop,

taught for three years, and then died on a cross. The external is reduced to its lowest, circumstances are commonplace and meager, the framework of life is narrow and ungilded. The New Testament was written by men who were determined that we should fix our eyes on the man. They wish us to catch the beat of his heart, the swing of his mind, the orbit of his ideas. Everything is minimized and subordinated to that which is central and all important, the texture of his spirit and the attitude of his personality. With one accord they cry, "Behold the man!" They want us to know how he looked at things, how he felt toward things, and how things affected him. In a word, they want us to know his character. Let us accept their invitation and come and see.

Some of us have studied this man Jesus for many years. It is we who have the keenest desire to study him again. We shall find in him now things which we have never seen before. The eyes are always changing and the heart expands with the increase of the years. We climb to higher levels of knowledge through study and experience. The time will never come when we shall not relish the study of this man. He is the way to God. It is impossible to become too familiar with the way. He is the express image of the Father's person. The more we study him the richer is our knowledge of the heart of God. He has declared the Father. The more fully we understand him the deeper we see into the heart of Deity. If he and the Father are one, then to know him is indeed life eternal. If he is the author and finisher of faith, we need to see his unclouded face if we are to run with patience the race that is set before us. If we are to be changed from character to character by looking at his character, then every hour we spend in making that character clear and beautiful to our heart is blessed. The beloved disciple used to say, "We beheld his glory." They gazed upon him as he worked and talked and sang and prayed, and the very memory of what they saw lifted life to new altitudes and dimensions. The ripest and most experienced Christians are readiest to accept the invitation, "Come and see."

Some of us have studied this portrait only a little. Jesus is a name, but as a person he is shadowy and unreal. His face has become obscured. Our heart does not feel his power. We are not indifferent to him, but we have no keen sense of loyalty to him, no purifying consciousness of adoration. We need to study him afresh. It may be that as we study him he will step out of the picture and take his place by our side. Not until we know him as a comrade do we get from him what he has to give. Because his face is dim we are often depressed and defeated. We are always faint in life's hard places unless we are close enough

to catch the light of his eye and feel the strong beating of his unconquerable heart. It may be that to some of us he has been petrified into a dogma. It is a great day for the soul when Jesus stands before it for the first time as a man. Never shall I forget when for the first time he became human to me. It was on a Saturday evening when a great teacher was expounding the words, "Father, save me from this hour." In a flash I saw Jesus shrinking, and the fountains of my heart were opened.

Some of us have scarcely studied him at all. All we know we know by hearsay. We are prejudiced against this Jesus of Nazareth. His face has been distorted partly by the misrepresentations of others and partly by our own idiosyncrasies. It may be that during this study some of us shall see him for the first time as he is.

There are those who do not like metaphysics; let them come and look upon a full-statured man. They do not care for doctrine, let them study a life. They are not interested in dogma, let them fix their gaze upon a person. If the word "revelation" has had to them a mysterious or theological sound, let them contemplate the crowning revelation—the revelation made in the character of a man.

We shall not discuss the question how the Gospel portrait got here. It is enough for our present purpose to know that it is here. If any one should care to point out minor defects in the workmanship, it is enough to say that the portrait does its work. It nourishes faith in God. It keeps the fires of hope and gladness burning on the altar. Men have various theories of the portrait and make divers criticisms of it, but the world is dominated by it. I ask you to look at it. Other men are looking at it. They are looking at it all around the globe. Millions feel while looking at it that in this portrait they get the largest disclosures of the mind and purpose of the Eternal. It is indisputable that this portrait draws many hearts nearer to God. It may draw you. Only look at it. Other things are passing, but this portrait is a reality which abides. Many a treasure has been melted in the crucible, but not this. In many circles the Bible has been growing less and the church also has been dwindling, but everywhere the wide world over the character of Jesus has been looming larger before the eyes of thinking men. By looking at it, it may grow also upon you.

And may I ask you also to pray while you look. The depth to which you see into a mind or heart depends upon what you bring with you to the contemplation of it. You cannot

appreciate the masterpiece of a musician unless you have music in you, or the painting of an artist unless you have in you something of the temperament which the artist has, nor can you understand a character unless you are akin to it in the deepest tendencies and aspirations of your being. The masters of music and art and life reveal themselves only to those who in some measure share their spirit. Would you study the character of Jesus with largest profit, you must respond to that which was dominant in his life. He was preeminently a man of prayer. His was the reverent heart and his look was ever upward. They who pray breathe the atmosphere in which he lived and take the attitude by which they are best fitted to understand his deeds and sayings. In studying a person spiritual harmony is everything. James lived under the same roof with Jesus but did not understand him. Paul lived far from him but understood him completely. Understanding souls is not a matter of physical proximity or intellectual effort: everything depends on insight and spiritual sympathy. In studying Jesus men ought always to pray and not to faint.

www.ldsinsight.org