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A LITTLE BOOK OF LOVE AND LIFE

SERMON

BY THE REVEREND ETHELBERT DUDLEY WARFIELD, D.D., LL.D.
President of Lafayette College
President of the Board of Directors

“These are written, that ye may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye may have life in his name.” John xx: 31.

“THESE are written, that ye may believe.” This book is a book with a purpose. No mere biography, no calm and colorless study of the life of a man. It is a great plea. A plea made at the judgment bar of every soul to which it comes. A plea for the hero to whom the heart of the writer was attached by the strongest ties of obligation, the tenderest bonds of affection, that He may receive the full meed of praise and honor to which He is entitled; but far more a plea for the reader that he may share the fealty of the writer and find for himself that life in which the author rejoices.

No mere dry-as-dust zeal has led the writer to seek out, after the manner of biographers, every minutest fragment of information in regard to the subject of his book, and record it with pedantic care. Out of the immense stores of a memory crowded with knowledge and overflowing with information he selects with thoughtful reserve the matter most significant and germane to his purpose and marshals it with the consummate skill, not of the literary artist, but of the convinced disciple.

The whole world might not contain all that could be

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written of the life of his Lord. A few pages may suffice to prove Him to each sincere and sin-sick soul Christ and Lord. These are those pages. They belong to the literature of power, not of art, nor of criticism. They have proved their power in the experience of tens of thousands of devoted lives. They have been the warm sunshine winning back to loveliness and life frost-bound spirits held in the cold indifference of a living death. They have been as a rock in a storm, a safe foothold for many an imperilled heart. Upon them have critics flung themselves through ages upon ages, only to find themselves powerless to break the compelling power in the story which they tell. No figure can portray, no tongue can tell, all that these precious pages have meant to the Church of Christ. There they are a few leaves of a book, but here they are in the heart the living testimony of one who knew and loved Him who was for the writer and for us the resurrection and the life.

The unvarying tradition of the early church attributes this book to John the Apostle, and tells us that the elders of the church of Ephesus constantly besought their beloved bishop to write out for those who should come after him, and should not hear his living testimony, the story that he was accustomed to tell of the living and dying and rising again of his divine Master. At last yielding to their entreaties he wrote the book that bears his name.

The story is worthy of the book and the book of the story. It is clear that the date is late. John is already far on that long way which led him last of all the companions of the Lord to the grave. Mark and Matthew and Luke have written their Gospels. John and the church at large have these noble pictures of Jesus' life. He does not need to repeat the main features of a history

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already so familiar. He rather needs to enrich it with special features of Jesus' teaching, to show that from the first men were repelled as well as attracted by His words of loving appeal as much as by those of high authority, and to draw out with power and plainness the great meaning of it all—the Messiahship of Jesus, His Sonship, and His gift of life through belief in His name.

In a spirit characteristic of his Lord, John throws across the opening passage of his narrative the morning beam of divine revelation. Jesus seems never to have omitted an opportunity to bring the Old Testament teaching into His own. Paul had already in his second letter to the Corinthians flashed this same sunbeam into his message when he wrote: "God who commanded the light to shine out of darkness hath shined in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ." John gives it a new and richer meaning as he develops in a few words his doctrine of the eternal Word.

Turning then to his story he brings the forerunner, whose disciple he was, upon the scene, and in a narrative all athrob with life details day by day the opening of Christ's ministry as he knew it. The short records of each day's incident are like the strong wing-beats of an eagle mounting up to its place of more than world-wide vision. Yet no simile can equal the simple facts of the narrative.

For John gives us here an old man's memory of a momentous day in his youth; of the day that he first met Jesus. The day on which we first met Jesus must be to each of us, however unfruitful our lives, a day of deep significance and precious memory. But to John with his capacity for love, his capacity for being loved, who

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was the beloved of Jesus, what must that day have been! Yet it came in no blinding splendor, no revelation of things unutterable. The simple story, as is generally true of the things that mean most to the soul, is a tale of every day in its outer features. John the Baptist is standing with his disciples and Jesus passes by. John points Him out, saying: "Behold the Lamb of God." Even the heart of John, the young and eager disciple, seems not to have kindled at the words. It is only when on the next day the Baptist again makes the same declaration that John and Andrew are aroused and follow Jesus. Already a seeker after God, John speedily comes to share with Andrew and Philip the belief that they had found Him of whom Moses in the law, and the prophets, did write, and that He was Messias.

Thus John makes us see that it is to the heart prepared that Jesus comes as the Christ. And even he was not at once ready for all that great truth imports. The seeker after God became the disciple of Jesus. He went and saw where he dwelt. He abode with Him. The old home was forsaken. The old life was left behind. The busy hands no longer drew the nets. Now it is that he takes the open road with Jesus and learns new lessons by the way. The old world takes on new meanings. The sower as he sows the seed, the digger after hid treasure, the thirsty wayfarer as he draws water from the well, even the familiar fishermen as they toil at their nets, have a new significance, and require fresh interpretations. The simplest things seem to have deeper meaning, but the greater mysteries of life grow more plain. The long sought clue to the deepest mystery of all is at last discovered. The love of God is manifest in the flesh. He beholds in Him who is the Christ the very Son of God.

Day by day the meaning of it all works itself out. Sometimes in His words, His wonderful words of life; sometimes in His silence, the silence of One whose spirit walks with God; sometimes in His deeds, His acts of help and healing; sometimes in His inaction, the submission of One who knew how both to bear and to forbear; always and forever, the Great Teacher led the responsive pupil up along the shining way of life. Now it is a day of sunlit glory as when He was transfigured on the mount, now of tremendous shadow turned to light as when Lazarus is raised up, but often it is half in sunshine, half in shade, and, ere the Lord of Glory was perfectly made known, a *via dolorosa*, through Gethsemane and on to Calvary.

While there is a great tenderness in John's picture of Him to whom he had listened as his master, and learned to acknowledge as his God in the throes of the awful agony of His night of humiliation, there is also a noble restraint. Over it all rests the assured calm of Him who knows the sequel. That the day dies but to return again in restored beauty. That the tragedy, awful as it is, is not of death unto death, but of death unto life. That the crucifixion of love is also love's coronation. And to John as he writes, the sorrow of his soul for the sufferings of the best beloved is assuaged by the consolation of that dear Lord who, though He died, still lives; though He suffered, reigns in glory.

And so the narrative moves with growing power and never wavering confidence to the confession of the restored faith of Thomas: "My Lord and my God"; and Jesus' benediction: "Thomas, because thou hast seen me thou hast believed: blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed." Here he pauses. Surely what

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has been written must suffice. Surely the object of his writing will be attained. And so he says: "Many other signs truly did Jesus in the presence of his disciples which are not written in this book; but these are written, that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye might have life through his name."

It is the fashion in the critical world to approach such a book as this through an introductory study of its date and authorship, its authenticity and its relation to contemporary thought. A mist is thereby often raised that obscures its clearness and dulls its brightness. It is its own best answer to such objections as have been raised in regard to it. As in a court of justice no questions may be raised as to the character and credibility of a witness until he has told his story, and as a story told with convincing directness, simplicity and evident familiarity with the subject testified to, possesses and controls the minds of judge and jury despite the assaults of any cross-examination, so this book justifies itself generation after generation to those who approach it with an open mind.

Whoever wrote it knew Jesus and knew Him as Christ and God. Who could have known Him so fully and so completely as the beloved disciple? Who could have written of Him with such a soaring spirit entering into the fulness of His love and His purpose to save men from sin for eternal life as he to whom has been assigned for symbol the eagle rising above the darkness of the storm and baring his eye to the full blaze of the flaming sun? But whoever wrote it, it has fulfilled its purpose and will continue to do so through the ages to come in giving to many their fullest vision of a divine Saviour and their surest grasp upon eternal life.

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This beautiful book then is the story of a great friendship. How we delight to talk of such friendships, to call friendship the "master-passion," to praise those who have shown a great capacity for friendship, to applaud the self-sacrifice of the few who have effaced themselves for their friends as Jonathan did for David. Friendship indeed is marked by some of the finest of human virtues. Affection perhaps comes first, then generosity of heart; when testing times come, affection deepens into devotion, and generosity into capacity for sacrifice; faith and trust and constancy are found in the bright constellation. In all these things this book abounds, for Jesus was the friend of John and John of Jesus, and no ennobling trait of friendship is wanting in the story.

But who could ever be content to call this merely the annals of a great friendship? It defies limitation to merely human ties, to a life bounded by the cradle and the grave. Perhaps a higher mode is found in the rare and beautiful devotion of a disciple to a great teacher. Plato has dignified such an association and John surely glorifies it. Socrates, too, led Plato to look with longing out through the gates of death. Philosophy brings into such a relationship the exalting power of intellectual aspiration and moral purpose. John found in the fellowship of Jesus all that philosophy had to offer and more than philosophy had to give—the transforming power of a great faith. He not only looked out beyond the gates of death, he looked forth into the eternal years of God and brought heaven down to earth.

But John had more than this to tell. He had a philosophical ideal and a practical purpose. He had lived into an age when men were seeking to philosophize away the facts of his history as they had earlier denied their occurrence. He sets himself to testify to his facts, to

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establish their relation to history and prophecy, and vindicate for every soul who will accept it the vivifying power of faith. And this for no mere academic purpose. Philosophy was not self-sufficient for him. It was to make men understand the real meaning of life; of a life lived in love for love's own dear sake; of a love that was divine in source as well as in character; of a life that was eternal as well as divine. In short, John set himself to make men understand and embrace life and love in the assured faith in Him who was Himself Life and Love.

We are prone to think that our difficulties are peculiar to our own age and greater than those of any other time. But the very same features of Christ's gospel are emphasized by John as need emphasis to-day: first, the historical connection of Christianity and Judaism, the oneness of the revelation of God in the Old and New Testaments, that salvation is of the Jews, that Jesus is the Christ; second, that the Word was made flesh, that Jesus is the very Son of God; third, that the life which Jesus came to proclaim is natural and real, as Tertullian has beautifully said: "The soul is by nature Christian"; and, finally, that entrance into that life is through belief on the name of Jesus.

The position of John gives significance to the purpose of his Gospel. He is no longer the young disciple full of eager devotion, but of as yet unchastened heart. He has not only passed through the tragedy of Jesus' earthly career, with its rising hopes and declining fortunes, with its blinding lights and its unfathomable darknesses, with its poignant sorrows and heavenly joys; he has not only found the clew to its mystery, and the purpose of its plan; but a long life has made him understand the attitude of men to the gospel he had to preach. He knew

how strong are its attractions, how great its repulsions. He knew what barriers sin could raise before it, what opposition it could arouse in hearts dominated by the power of Satan. The minister of the Word speaks in him. Nothing is more striking in the arrangement of his material than the way in which he shows how throughout Jesus' teaching He drew some and repelled others. And this is surely the accent that the aged man of long experience alone would have been sure to give. Despite the warmth and tenderness that singled John out as the beloved disciple, and has made all his writings peculiarly the reflection of the love of God in Christ, this characteristic has brought into his Gospel the hot note of him who so loved his Lord that his heart flamed out against those who despised and rejected Him. Were it not for this we should be somewhat at a loss to know why he should have been singled out by such a name as a Son of Thunder. As it is the Gospel is not only warm with a spirit of life sprung from the sources of divine love, but it is also palpitant with a sense of the condemnation which is due to all rejection of love and mercy, with warning to those who choose death rather than life.

We are apt to select from this book passages of rare and exquisite beauty; the great teachings of Christ as to the new-birth, as to Himself as the light of the world, His discourse at the Last Supper, and His wonderful prayer, that prayer in which John Knox tells us he cast his anchor; and neglect the full current of the book as a plea for the entering into eternal life through faith in Christ. To do so is to pay less than due regard to John and to his Lord. It is in its very power to persuade, to warn, to arouse, to convince, to send forth to serve, to create in the heart that peace which the world cannot know, that

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its perennial power resides. This is no doubt partly due to the fact that in revealing his Lord, John also writes his own spiritual biography. Certainly in so doing he does away with the possibility of much honest wavering as to the meaning of the life he records.

John grew up in the hope of Israel, he became the disciple of the Baptist whom he accepted as the promised forerunner of the Messiah, he was led by the Baptist's express indication to become the follower of Jesus, he learned from Jesus to reconcile His humiliation with His mission of redemption and to find in the salvation of sinners the coming of the Kingdom, he drew from the teaching of the Old Testament as well as from the bitter experience of his actual life the meaning of the blood-bought pardon, and he looked upon his risen Lord with his own eyes and believed. From these things there grew up within him a new life which he knew by the evidence of daily witnesses to be of the very Spirit of God. In the power of that life he lived and labored and wrote. But all of this is as it were but the shadow. It is to be read in the Gospel. But the substance of that Gospel is the other life, as real, as completely the outgrowth of the Old Testament, as entirely involved in the story of the redemption of men by the sacrifice of Calvary. Yet are the two inseparable. As the Word was made flesh and dwelt among men, so the Master lived again in the disciple.

No wonder that John cries: "Now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be. But we know that when he shall appear we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is." Already the oneness of the life of the disciple and the teacher had been known and felt by him. The complete outworking of the power of a transforming faith alone remained. It is no wonder

that he who wrote this book should have breathed on those for whose spiritual life he was so solicitous the benedictions of his letters; no wonder that to him was given the visions of the Apocalypse. The glorious beauty of the images in which the brightness of heaven is represented for us has never been surpassed by the mind and pen of man. Yet it is not in those visions, but in the discourses preceding the passion and in the portrayal of the suffering Saviour that John has reached most surely the ground and anchor of our hopes.

Let no rude hand rob us of the robust realities of those pictures. Through suffering He passed, so must we pass to gain the fulness of knowledge of the meaning of life and love; through death He passed that we in passing through the death of the body may enter into the fulness of life with Him; from death He returned in the triumph of Him who Himself is life. In His life is manifested for us light and life.

The world has never been content with itself. In the heart of man there has ever been a divine unrest. Not always felt, nor by every one. Most notable in the nobler few; in times of special need, it has become more general and more poignant. Always upon a quest, it has never found its goal. A few have assumed the rôle of great teachers, the many have been content to learn of them, or like the blind and insensate mob to drift, or drive madly on without an object and without a care. To all seekers after truth, truth which to him finds embodiment in a life, John offers this little book. He repeats the Master's words to those who rejected Him: "Ye search the scriptures because ye think that in them ye have eternal life; and these are they which bear witness of me; and ye will not come to me that ye may have life." He

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clearly understood the blindness of men. But he trusted to the Spirit testifying with his words to make men accept Jesus as the Christ and the very Son of God.

Not only have they proved for us the persuasive words of a living and abiding faith, but also words of inspiration and strength and of tender consolation. Let us often keep before our minds the words themselves and the glorious beauty of the Son of God which they portray, and, also, the benign figure of John, the aged, ministering to the church at Ephesus, telling over and over again of his fellowship with Jesus, drawing about him old and young with the sublime story that he tells, illustrating it by his own life of love, of heroic constancy, of undivided loyalty. When we study his book there is room in our hearts for one person—Jesus only. But we may sometimes withdraw our minds a little from that central sun, and thank God for the beauty and the power of the love of Christ made manifest in the disciple.