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PATHWAY OF THE PERFECT MAN

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Flanigan, Jim

There are six places in the Gospels whose names begin with “Beth.” They are: Bethlehem, Bethabara, Bethsaida, Bethesda, Bethphage, and Bethany. The prefix “Beth” means “The House of,” and these places seem to touchingly chart the Life and Ministry of the Lord Jesus, coming into our world as He did at Bethlehem and finally leaving it from Bethany on the Mount of Olives. Between Bethlehem and Bethany lies that lovely pathway of the perfect Man. It is always a joy to those who love Him to trace that pathway, contemplating the beauties of a life which brought so much pleasure to God. Bethlehem means “The House of Bread” and to that House of Bread He came, He Who was the Bread of God (John 6:33).

Bethlehem marked the beginning on earth of a life which, as John tells us, was the manifestation of a life which had been eternally with the Father (1John 1:2). Our fellowship is now with the Father as we also feast on the Bread of God.

What emotions are stirred in the hearts of believers at every mention of Bethlehem. I stood one day with an aged saint in the center of Bethlehem. At the realization of where he was, the dear man gripped my arm and as tears welled in his eyes and trickled down his cheeks all he could say was, “Is this Bethlehem? Is this Bethlehem?” What memories flood the hearts of those who love the Savior! A crowded inn; a manger; swaddling clothes; a quiet maid from Nazareth with her newborn Son; a few shepherds; a multitude of angels from the heavens announcing the birth. Perhaps the sentiments of the carol are indeed true,

*O little town of Bethlehem
How still we see thee lie;
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep
The silent stars go by.
Yet in thy dark street shineth
The everlasting Light,
The hopes and fears of all the years
Are met in thee tonight.*

But there is more! There are 89 chapters in the gospels but among them, Luke chapter 2 is unique, recounting details concerning the incarnation which cannot be found elsewhere. The chapter is built around several personages, the great and the good. There is a Cæsar in Rome, a carpenter in Nazareth, shepherds in the Bethlehem fields, angels in the sky above, and two aged saints in the temple in Jerusalem. How wide-ranging is the scope of this chapter: Rome, Nazareth, Bethlehem, the heavenlies, Jerusalem, but everything is designed to focus our attention on the true greatness, the Baby in the manger, the Lord from Heaven.

We think of the sovereignty of the Cæsar, the poverty of the carpenter, the ministry of the shepherds, the glory of the angels, and the piety of the saints. But the real sovereignty, the deeper poverty, the true shepherd character, the excelling glory, and the surpassing piety all belong to the holy Infant in the swaddling clothes.

The emperor in Rome is Cæsar Augustus, Cæsar the August. It was a title usurped by man as being divine and, in his empire, Cæsar was accorded divine honors. In his own little world, he was indeed sovereign, and, in that sovereignty, he had issued a decree that a census should be taken of the inhabitants of his kingdom. To facilitate this, every man was required to register in the city of his fathers and this necessitated that Joseph, being of the house and family of David, must travel to Bethlehem with Mary his betrothed wife. Cæsar the August, however, was unaware that there was a greater sovereignty than his. The heart of the emperor was as a thing

pliable in the hand of God and it was God Who really planned that Joseph should travel to Bethlehem.

The approaching Birth would be in fact the advent of the long-promised Messiah and the prophecy was that Messiah should be born in Bethlehem Ephratah, Bethlehem in the Land of Judah (Micah 5:2). There was of course, a Bethlehem much nearer to Nazareth, Bethlehem HaGalilit, Bethlehem of Galilee, just a few miles from Joseph's home town. How convenient that would have been, but Bethlehem of Judea it must be, in accord with the prophecy, and that was some five or six miles south of Jerusalem, meaning a journey from Nazareth of perhaps 70 miles through difficult and often dangerous country. It was Cæsar's sovereignty that moved the carpenter, but it was God's sovereignty that moved the Cæsar.

So, the couple travelled from Nazareth to Bethlehem and Luke records, almost in a matter of fact manner, "And so it was, that, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered. And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped Him in swaddling clothes, and laid Him in a manger." Many others had likewise travelled to Bethlehem and the town was crowded, as was the inn. Someone said, "No room" and when Mary gave birth to her firstborn she wrapped Him in swaddling clothes and laid Him in a manger. Messiah had come! There was no royal welcome. No pageantry. And yet, the Baby in the manger bed was "God manifest in flesh" (1Tim 3:16). Well do believers now sing,

*Who is He in yonder stall
At whose feet the shepherds fall?
'Tis the Lord, O wondrous story;
'Tis the Lord, the King of Glory;
At His feet we humbly fall
Crown Him, crown Him, Lord of all.*

This, however, is not at all the first mention of Bethlehem in our Bible. The earliest references are found in Genesis 35:19; 48:7. The matriarch Rachel died just outside Bethlehem while giving birth to a son. She named him Benoni, meaning "Son of my sorrow," but his father Jacob renamed him Benjamin, meaning "Son of my right

hand.” How prophetic it was of our Blessed Lord. Israel has only known Him as a Man of sorrows but from His sorrow He has been exalted to the right hand of God.

There are other rather sad mentions of Bethlehem in the days of the Judges which are not in keeping with the present meditation, but it may be remembered that Bethlehem was then the hometown of Boaz and Ruth and birthplace of David, illustrious predecessors of the Christ.

Much more must be said, but that is for another chapter.



Flanigan, Jim

It was noted in the earlier meditation that Luke's account of the Incarnation of the Savior in chapter 2 begins with a reference to Cæsar the emperor but then moves immediately to Joseph the carpenter. What a contrast! As has been suggested, one depicts sovereignty and the other represents poverty, and just as the real sovereignty is in the manger so also is the true poverty.

Perhaps we cannot really measure the Savior's poverty since we cannot fully measure His riches in glory. "He became poor," Paul writes, "Ye know His poverty" (2Cor 8:9). He owned heaven and earth and the entire creation. The cattle on a thousand hills were His (Psa 50:10). But He became poor. Other different words are translated "poor" in our New Testament, indicating varying degrees of poverty but this word means "destitute." Our Lord never owned property. He never accumulated earthly riches. Never do we read of Him ever handling money. When He died He bequeathed only His few personal garments and these were stolen from Him. He became poor indeed, and that voluntarily. He was born of a maiden who, when her time came for bringing an offering to the Lord, availed herself of the law for the poor and offered only two little birds (Luke 2:22-24; Lev 12:2, 6, 8).

The emperor and his offspring may well be draped in scarlet and ermine, but the Carpenter was truly poor, and Mary's child was wrapped only in swaddling bands. But yet, He was the inestimably great One whose glory, in the purpose of God, had been temporarily veiled for the divine visitation to earth.

We are then introduced to the shepherds. A plaque in the fields at Bethlehem today reads, "The revelation of God's great condescension was first given to shepherds, poorest of sinners. Still, today, God's word is true that He will behold those who are of a contrite heart and will dwell with them." How interesting it is, and how very fitting, that the angelic messengers brought their message

to shepherds first of all. They by-passed the king and his cohorts, both governors and tetrarchs. Likewise, they ignored high priests and chief priests as well as a legion of priests who ministered in Judæa at that time and appeared first to humble shepherds.

The shepherds abode in the fields and kept the night watches, overseeing their flocks. It was a demanding ministry, requiring constant and careful watchfulness both day and night. But while these shepherds guarded their sheep they were now to learn that the Shepherd of Israel had come to Bethlehem and slept, wrapped in swaddling clothes, in a manger bed. Later, in the days of His flesh He would say, “I am the good Shepherd; the good Shepherd giveth His life for the sheep.” And again, “I am the good Shepherd, and know My sheep, and am known of Mine” (John 10:11, 14). He was no hireling. The sheep were His own and He would love them to the extent of giving His life for them, and they would love Him in return. It is perhaps not surprising that the shepherds should say, “Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass” (Luke 2:15).

What a sight and what a scene that was on that memorable night: A multitude of the heavenly host addressing a few humble shepherds in the fields of Bethlehem. And what a message they brought! It was a message of glad tidings and great joy. A Savior had been born. He was Christ the Lord. Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace! Probably not since the day of creation had there been such a time for rejoicing as this. Would some of the angels in this heavenly host remember that creation morn, “When the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy” (Job 38:7)?

Notice that when the herald angel first appeared to the shepherds, the glory of the Lord shone round about them. But even greater than the glory of the Lord was the fact that the Lord of glory had made His advent. There was no need to be afraid. The Lord of glory had come in the form of a little Babe. So, they went to see and left the scene praising and glorifying God.

Luke’s narrative then moves on and some 40 days later, Joseph and Mary bring the Child to Jerusalem, to the temple. It is refreshing to

know that amid the unbelief and apathy of the nation and the hypocrisy of scribes and Pharisees there were hearts that genuinely waited for the Messiah. Of these, Simeon and Anna were representative and typical. “There was a man ... Simeon ... and there was one Anna” (Luke 2:25, 36).

What a true worshipper Simeon was! He stood in the temple with the Christ in his arms and looking up he blessed God. So, do we in this later day stand in a greater temple and bless God, bringing our gratitude for the gift of His Son. What a principle there is here too; Simeon blessed God (v28) and then blessed them (v34). The man who speaks well of God speaks well of God’s people. Nor was Simeon parochial for he could see beyond Israel and knew that He Who was the glory of Israel would be a Light to lighten the Gentiles too.

Anna was likewise a truly devoted soul who had waited for this day. She was very much advanced in years. It was 91 years since her wedding day but after a short married life of only seven years she had now been widowed for 84 years and for these many years she had given herself to a service of fasting and prayers, never departing from the temple either by night or day. Little is recorded of her words, but she gave thanks to God and spake of Him to those who looked for redemption in Jerusalem. The Redeemer had come!

Bethlehem! What memories! But the central wonder is a Baby wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. May we, too, sincerely serve and worship.



Flanigan, Jim

The name Bethabara occurs only once in our New Testament (John 1:28). Some ancient manuscripts, however, render this “Bethany,” and to distinguish it from the better known Bethany which lies about two miles from Jerusalem on the Mount of Olives the qualifying clause is added, making the name “Bethany beyond Jordan.” Many commentators and several versions, including *JND* and the *RV*, follow this latter reading, but it is generally agreed that whatever the proper name, the place where John was baptizing was situated on the banks of the river Jordan some 12 miles north of Jericho.

For the purpose of the present meditation, the name Bethabara will be used and occurring where it does in the narrative, the meaning is most significant for Bethabara means “The House of Passage or Crossing.”

It is now 30 years since the events at Bethlehem, the subject of earlier meditations. During the period intervening between Bethlehem and Bethabara, the blessed Lord was in Nazareth. So, little has been recorded of those years. To us they are indeed hidden years, years of relative obscurity when the Savior lived with Joseph and Mary in the simplicity of a carpenter’s home and moved quietly among the men of Nazareth. He was ever the Son of God of course, and the eye of the Father was ever upon Him, delighting in Him. If men did not know or recognize Him, yet He grew up “before Him” as a tender plant, morally fragrant in the parched ground of an unbelieving nation (Isa 53:2). The Spirit of God has indeed hidden the details of those years from us, except for that delightful glimpse of the boy Who said, “Wist ye not that I must be about My Father’s business?” Many stories have been invented of those boyhood days, but they are hypothetical, apocryphal, and imaginative, and do not deserve our credence, nor do we need them. What we do know is that every word and deed of the boy Jesus, His every thought and action, were for the Father’s glory, as events at Bethabara will now confirm.

He was now embarking upon busy years when men would throng Him and make such constant demands upon Him that He would scarce have anywhere to lay His head. By day, when the foxes were resting in their lairs, and by night, when the birds were peacefully nesting, men would seek Him (Matt 8:20).

For 30 years, while Jesus lived at Nazareth, John was living in the Judæan deserts (Luke 1:80). His aged parents, Zacharias and Elisabeth, had lived at Ein Kerem in the hill country and may soon have died, but there is a strong, and perhaps reliable tradition, that John dwelt, at least for some of those years prior to his ministry, with the ultra-orthodox Jewish community known as the Essenes. These lived at Qumran on the shores of the Dead Sea where many interesting relics of their way of life have been preserved. They lived strictly and frugally, adhering closely to the laws in their Torah. Perhaps this accounts for John's dress (garment of camel's hair and a leather girdle), and for his simple diet (locusts and wild honey).

But John was indeed a chosen vessel and his preaching soon caused a stir in Judæa. "John did no miracle" (John 10:41), but his preaching was so powerful and the crowds so great, that it soon came to the ears of the Jewish leaders. A delegation of priests, Levites, and Pharisees was sent to interview him (John 1:19, 24). John preached holiness and, in the strongest of language, he denounced sin. He warned of wrath to come for a generation of vipers and he demanded repentance. He then baptized the confessedly repentant ones in the waters of the Jordan and called for reality, commanding them to bring forth fruits worthy of repentance.

He had a message for all and sundry, religious and irreligious, publicans, soldiers, and common people. They all came, and his message was the same for all, calling on them to prepare for the coming of Messiah. Later he would boldly confront King Herod himself and again his message would be unchanged. It would finally result in his imprisonment and death, but John was faithful even unto death. He was a loyal ambassador and would resolutely and unswervingly represent the true King.

But John's finest hour came at Bethabara. For the Lord Jesus it was indeed the "House of Crossing." He would now pass from the privacy of home life to the publicity of three years of a very busy ministry and to John was given the privilege of introducing Messiah to Israel. The Christ had come. Such had been the character and influence of the Baptist that many were wondering if he were the Christ or not but John's denial of that was so very emphatic. His answers to them became shorter and shorter, ever more brief, almost as if he was impatient with them. They asked "Who art Thou?" And He confessed, and denied not; but confessed, 'I am not the Christ.' And they asked him, "What then? Art thou Elias?" And he saith, 'I am not.' "Art Thou that prophet?" And he answered, 'No'" (John 1:19-21). Yet again they asked "Who art thou? that we may give an answer to them that sent us. What sayest thou of Thyself?" John was not much interested in speaking of himself and declared that he was just a voice crying in the wilderness. One mightier than he was coming, and they should prepare for Him. John baptized in water but the mightier One would baptize in the Holy Spirit and in fire.

They had not long to wait. "The next day John seeth Jesus coming unto him, and saith, 'Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world. This is He of whom I said, After me cometh a Man which is preferred before me: for He was before me'" (John 1:29-30). Messiah had come and was standing among them!



Flanigan, Jim

Bethabara is indeed the “House of Crossing” for our Lord Jesus, as we have seen. He traversed from privacy to publicity, from the solitude to the multitude from privacy to publicity; from the solitude to the multitude. It was final too, for there would be no going back. Did He ever visit Bethlehem again? The busy pathway ahead would lead to His death at Calvary and, until then, His days would be filled with a constant ministry of preaching, teaching, healing, and praying, with lonely nights on Olivet. Bethabara was a crisis, a turning point, where John the Baptist pointed Him out to the people. Another has written:

*He gazed upon Him as He walked;
He watched Him as He trod;
And cried with rapt and reverent mien
“Behold the Lamb of God.”*

*At last the stars of prophecy
Had melted into day;
And shadows from the ages past
Had passed in light away.*

What a privileged man John was! He was the porter who opened the door for the Shepherd of the sheep (John 10:3). Soon the Shepherd would call His sheep by name; they would hear His voice and He would lead them out; Andrew and John, Peter and James, Philip and Nathanael, and so many others.

John called to his hearers, “Behold the Lamb of God.” It was an early intimation of Calvary where the Savior would bear the sin of the world. For centuries men had been bringing their lambs to God; now God was bringing His Lamb to men. John was a true witness indeed, but there was a greater witness than John.

Jesus had come to Jordan where John was baptizing. It was a baptism unto repentance and those who submitted to it were thereby

confessing sins and seeking forgiveness. How surprised John was when Jesus came!

What does it mean when John says, “I knew Him not”? Their two families were related, their mothers being cousins, yet, living so far apart it was indeed possible that John had never seen, and did not know Jesus. But how could he then say, “I have need to be baptized of Thee, and comest Thou to me?” (Matt 3:14). There are two possibilities. Either John means that, although he knew Jesus and knew the holy life of the Nazareth years, yet he did not then know Him to be the Messiah. Or, it may well be, as some suggest, that it had been divinely indicated to John, even as Jesus approached him, that this was indeed the promised One. In any case, in great humility, the Savior insisted that John should baptize Him.

Of course, our Lord Jesus had nothing of which to repent, as every believer knows. How then, or why, should the impeccable One be baptized in such a baptism? It has been beautifully remarked that He saw His sheep struggling in the waters of death and He fain would be with them. It was an encouragement to those who were responding to the preaching of John and it was also an encouragement for John that One so great should acknowledge his baptism. And was it not a preview of Calvary itself? “I have a baptism to be baptized with,” He would later tell His disciples (Luke 12:50). He would indeed be submerged in the deep waters of death and judgment for others and His baptism in Jordan was but a faint preview of that solemn day.

There was a greater witness than that of John, for the Father Himself was to speak. As is well known, Bethabara was the scene of a revelation of the great Triunity, that Holy Trinity of divine Persons. The Son stood in the water, the Spirit descended and abode upon Him, and the Father’s voice spoke from the heavens. How fitting it was that, at this public introduction of Messiah, the Godhead in unity would be manifest, as if in holy approbation of the ministry that would follow. And what grace, what humility is this, that as the Perfect Man was introduced, He was first seen standing on the muddy bed of the Jordan river. It was not a pleasant river. Naaman the Syrian knew that and said, “Are not Abana and Pharpar, rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel?” (2Kings 5:12). But

the Savior stood there, as if indicative of the measure of the stoop that brought Him into our world to save. He came from the heights of glory to the mud of Jordan!

“And Jesus, when He was baptized, went up straightway out of the water: and, lo, the heavens were opened unto Him, and He saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove, and lighting upon Him: And lo a voice from heaven, saying, “This is My beloved Son, in Whom I am well pleased” (Matt 3:16, 17). As another version says, “In Whom I have found My delight” (*JND*). Here is, retrospectively, what the Son meant to the Father during the hidden years in Nazareth. And what a wonder was this, that there had lived in Nazareth, for 30 years, a Man Who brought delight to the heart of God! He had been like a tender plant in a dry ground. The ground was parched and barren, steeped in sin and abounding in hypocrisy. In the midst of this sin-cursed scene, there had lived One Who brought pleasure to God.

Now, at Bethabara, God would introduce that lovely Man to the nation, and from this point, every eye would be upon Him. Some would love Him. Some would hate Him. Soon He would be “despised and rejected of men, a Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.” But He would continue to live and minister for God’s pleasure. And yet again, in years to come, heaven would open and once again the Father would declare His delight in His Son.

Now, having crossed from the obscurity of Nazareth, Jesus will proceed to Bethsaida, the “House of Nets,” to call those who would be His companions in the great ministry of fishing for men.



Flanigan, Jim

The name Bethsaida occurs seven times in the gospels. It is not clear however, if there were two Bethsaidas or just one, and the controversy rages on. A compromise seems to be that there may have been only one Bethsaida but that the town straddled the River Jordan touching both its East and West banks near to where the river enters the Sea of Galilee on its Northern shore. Similarly, there are today two Jerusalems, the Old City and the New, but only one Jerusalem, and there are two Nazareths, the old Nazareth and Nazareth Illit, but only one Nazareth.

Smith's Bible Dictionary says, "In reality there is but one Bethsaida, that known on many maps as Bethsaida Julias. The fact is that Bethsaida was a village on both sides of the Jordan as it enters the Sea of Galilee on the north, so that the western part of the village was in Galilee and the eastern portion in Gaulonitis, part of the tetrarchy of Philip. This eastern portion was built up into a beautiful city by Herod Philip, and named by him Bethsaida Julias, after Julia the daughter of the Roman emperor Tiberius Caesar. On the plain of Butaiha, a mile or two to the east, the 5000 were fed. The western part of the town remained a small village." The controversy need not presently concern us and in our meditation, we shall treat the references as one Bethsaida.

However, for those interested in pursuing the question, it may be profitable to quote in full the comments of Dr. W. M. Thompson, a recognized authority on matters relating to the land of Israel. He writes "I am of opinion that the invention of a second Bethsaida is wholly unnecessary. Reland, who first started the idea, confesses that he has no authority for it, but merely resorts to it as an ultimum refugium, a last resort, to solve an otherwise invincible topographical difficulty. I do not believe that another instance can be found of two cities of the same name close together on the same part of a small lake; and such hypothetical cities should not be created without

absolute necessity; and no such necessity exists in this case. All admit that there was a Bethsaida at the entrance of the Jordan into the lake. The greater part of it, certainly that part which Philip repaired, lay on the east bank of the river, and, therefore, it is maintained, must have belonged to Gaulanitis, and not to Galilee; and as the Bethsaida of Andrew, Peter, and Philip, was a city of Galilee (John 12:21), it is thought that we must have a second town of this name. But I think this is unnecessary. Any city built at the mouth of the Jordan would almost necessarily have part of its houses on the west bank of the stream; and this would be literally and geographically within the territory of Galilee. Peter, Andrew, and Philip were born there, and would be mentioned as Galileans. I believe, therefore, that there was but one Bethsaida at the head of the lake, and that it was at the mouth of the Jordan; and thus, we settle the sites of all the places in this neighborhood which are intimately related to the history of our blessed Lord and His disciples" (*The Land and the Book*).

But enough of controversy! Bethsaida was indeed the hometown of Peter, Andrew, and Philip. They were fishermen who lived in the "House of Nets." Bethsaida was the scene of many of the mighty works of the Lord Jesus, but it has the unenviable reputation, with Chorazin and Capernaum, of having rejected the witness of those miracles and being destined for judgment (Matt 11:21-23), a judgment which was severe and literal, for today scarcely anything remains of these three towns. They have gone into oblivion and only a few black ruins remain. How solemn it was to reject such evidence of our Lord's greatness!

Doubtless, one of the better known miracles of the Lord Jesus was that of the feeding of the 5000. This occurred in a desert place, or, more accurately, a deserted, wilderness place, an uninhabited plain which belonged to Bethsaida on the east bank of the Jordan (Luke 9:10). It was a sad time for the disciples and they would need just the very encouragement which this miracle would bring. John the Baptist, who had earlier pointed some of them to Christ, had been beheaded by Herod. The disciples had taken up his body and laid it in a tomb. How sad indeed, and perhaps, how fearful, they must have been. Was the murder of John but a shadow, a foreboding, of what

men would do to the witnesses of Jesus? The Savior tenderly recognized their weariness and said, "Come ye yourselves apart into a desert place, and rest a while: for there were many coming and going, and they had no leisure so much as to eat. And they departed into a desert place by ship privately" (Mark 6:31-32).

The disciples took ship and sailed along the coastline to Bethsaida Julias, but the people saw them and followed on foot along the shore. They gathered in their throngs to Jesus and He taught them, moved with compassion toward them, because they were as sheep not having a shepherd. But the daylight was fast fading and the disciples could foresee a problem. It was a desert place. The day was far spent, and the people would be hungry. Before dark they must get to neighboring villages to buy bread. "Send them away," was the advice of the disciples. "They need not depart," was the Savior's answer. "Give ye them to eat." But how? Could they buy 200 pennyworth of bread? And would that be enough to feed such a multitude?

As is perhaps well-known, this is the only miracle recorded in all four Gospels. For a number of reasons John's account is especially interesting, and instructive. These must be considered in another paper.



Flanigan, Jim

As has been suggested, John's account of the feeding of the 5000 has certain details which the other three accounts do not have. Such details are, of course, supplementary and not at all contradictory. John seems to paint a background of utter weakness as far as men are concerned. The sun is setting; daylight is fading; the district is uninhabited and waste; the disciples have no bread and the multitude is great. Andrew, however, has found a boy with just a few victuals. "There is a lad here, which hath five barley loaves, and two small fishes: but what are they among so many?" Five barley loaves and two small fishes! Notice the weakness which is recorded only by John. Just a lad, a boy! The loaves are of barley, a cheaper cereal! The fishes are few and small! But little is much in the hand of the Savior and having seated the people in an orderly manner on the ground the disciples distributed the bread and fish for which the Savior had given thanks and which He had blessed. Miraculously, the thousands were fed, and 12 baskets full of fragments were taken up. Nothing must be lost.

The disciples were then instructed by the Lord to take a coasting voyage in the ship toward Bethsaida, or Capernaum, which were on the same side of the lake and just a few miles away. It was now dark, and the disciples were to be the privileged witnesses of yet another miracle while the people would have made Jesus their King. That, of course, was premature and He left them for the loneliness of the hillside.

The ship carrying the disciples ran into a storm. Those who are familiar with the Sea of Galilee will confirm how quickly, with little or no warning, a storm can arise in these waters. Sadly, it is recorded, "It was now dark, and Jesus was not come to them" (John 6:17). The wind blew, and the boisterous waves rose. How often has such been the experience of the saints! Things may be dark and the passage rough and perhaps He does not seem to answer. But He sees, and

knows, and on high He has been praying for them. He puts that which was troubling them beneath His feet and walks on the water toward them. "They see Jesus walking on the sea, drawing nigh unto the ship: and they were afraid. But He saith unto them, 'It is I; be not afraid.' Then they willingly received Him into the ship: and immediately the ship was at the land whither they went" (John 6:19-21). The Savior had chosen these men "that they should be with Him" (Mark 3:14). Was He teaching them that it would not always be, as we say, "plain sailing"? There would be storms and troubled waters. But still today for His saints it is true, "He maketh the storm a calm, so that the waves thereof are still" (Psa 107:29).

Although many mighty works had been wrought in or near Bethsaida, not many of these are individually recorded. There is indeed another interesting account of the miraculous in Mark 8:22-26. They had come to Bethsaida, probably Bethsaida Julias on the east side of Jordan since the Lord was moving toward the borders of Caesarea Philippi (Mark 8:27). A blind man was brought to Him. A man who could not find the way himself was guided by some friends. Do we not all have those who need us to help them toward the Savior?

It is an instance of great humility, sympathy, and tenderness, that Jesus Himself took the man by the hand and led him out of the town. Why? Of course we know that spiritually our greatest blessings come when we are alone with God, but it may well be true as John Wesley and others suggest that "It was in just displeasure against the inhabitants of Bethsaida for their obstinate infidelity, that our Lord would work no more miracles among them, nor even suffer the person he had cured, either to go into the town, or to tell it to any therein" (Mark 8:26).

For some reason, not explained, the Savior put saliva on the eyes of the blind man. Perhaps there was nothing miraculous in this, but it is indeed possible, as many think, that secretions had caused the poor man's eyelids to adhere together and rubbing them with saliva would loosen them. It was then that Jesus put His hand upon the blind eyes asking the man if he saw anything. He could see men walking, he said, but it was only by their movement that he could distinguish

them from trees. It seems evident that this man had not been born blind so was he now in that condition in which he had been before? When sight had been failing, did he remember? Again, the Lord put His hand upon his eyes, and made him look up. Now his sight was restored, and he saw clearly.

This is the only instance of a progressive healing and questions are often asked as to the reason for the gradual restoration. This is not explained and who are we to question sovereignty? If the Savior has chosen to do it this way, then He has rights. It does not suggest that there was any difficulty with an immediate restoration, but there may indeed have been mercy in it, bringing the poor man gradually into the light so that he was not dazzled by the unaccustomed brightness. Adam Clarke writes, "Our Lord could have restored this man to sight in a moment; but He chose to do it in the way mentioned in the text, to show that He is sovereign of His own graces; and to point out that, however insignificant means may appear in themselves, they are divinely efficacious when He chooses to work by them; and that, however small the first manifestations of mercy may be, they are nevertheless the beginnings of the fulness of the blessings of the gospel of peace."



Flanigan, Jim

The name Bethesda (house of mercy) occurs only once in our Bible, in John 5:2. It is the name of a pool in Jerusalem near to the sheep gate and not to be confused with Bethsaida, a village on the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee. It will be noticed that the word “market” in the *KJV* is italicized, indicating that it is not in the original text, nor is there any record of a market here. The Sheep Gate, however, is mentioned several times in the Book of Nehemiah (Neh 3:1; 3:32; 12:39) and is believed to be the gate through which sheep and oxen were brought to the temple for sacrifice.

Although there is not universal agreement as to the exact location of Bethesda, the site which has the most popular acceptance is that of the pool found during excavations in the Bezetha quarter of Jerusalem not far from Stephen’s Gate and the Tower of Antonia. The *New Unger’s Bible Dictionary* points out that this site is “below the crypt of the ruined fourth-century church and has a five-arch portico with faded frescoes of the miracle of Christ’s healing.” Barnes *Notes on the Bible* explains helpfully, “The word ‘porch’ commonly means a covered place surrounding a building, in which people can walk or sit in hot or wet weather. Here it probably means that there were five covered places, or apartments, in which the sick could remain, from each one of which they could have access to the water.” And what a variety of sick folk there was! Blind, halt, and withered. A sad picture of the havoc wrought among men by sin. And how pathetic was the man’s lament when he said, “Sir, I have no man.” Not only was he helpless in himself, but there was none to help; he was friendless.

If in years to come the site would be in doubt, the poor helpless man who was healed there would never forget or doubt the place of his healing. Graciously chosen from the sick multitude around him, for him it had indeed been a “House of Mercy” where the Savior had met him in his dire need and restored his strength. In this connection it is interesting to compare the miracles in John 5 and John 9: two

men, two pools, Bethesda and Siloam, both miracles on the Sabbath day. The man in John 5 could see but he couldn't walk. The man in John 9 could walk but he couldn't see. The Savior meets each case accordingly and asks nothing that they cannot give. Bethesda indicates "mercy." Siloam means "sent." The helplessness of the man in John 5 is dependant on mercy; he cannot "go" anywhere. The mobility of the man in John 9 means that he can obey the Lord's command, "go wash" and he does. Each miracle gives birth to a lengthy discourse of the Lord Jesus and each occasion the anger of the Jews.

Although the authenticity of John 5:4 is questioned by some, there seems to be no reason to doubt or omit it. As JND writes, "Some remains of blessing still existed among the Jews. Angels, ministers of that dispensation, still wrought among the people. Jehovah did not leave Himself without testimony. But strength was needed to profit by this instance of their ministry. That which the law could not do, being weak through the flesh, God has done through Jesus. The impotent man had desire, but not strength; to will was present with him, but no power to perform."

For 38 years this poor man had been infirm. The exact nature of his infirmity is not expressly stated though it must have been a palsy of some sort; nor do we know for how long he had been at the pool of Bethesda. Was 38 years the time of the nation's wandering in the wilderness? For full 40 years they had sojourned in the desert but were they not, for some of that time, led by the hand of the Lord? Thirty-eight years of national infirmity! How they needed Messiah with all the blessings which He could bring to them!

But these Jews of our Lord's day, who later would say to Him, "Give us a sign," would reject every sign that He would give them, as indeed they did now at Bethesda. Rather than believe, they would find fault and engage in controversy. Where was their mercy? A poor man had been healed after 38 years of infirmity and they could only quibble about Sabbath-keeping. "And immediately the man was made whole, and took up his bed, and walked: and on the same day was the Sabbath. The Jews therefore said unto him that was cured, it is the Sabbath day: it is not lawful for thee to carry thy bed." He retorted

that the One Who had made him whole had said, “take up thy bed and walk.”

At that time the man did not know the identity of the One Who had healed him, but it is good to notice that soon he made his way to the nearby temple, and it was there that he met Jesus and then testified concerning Him to the Jews who now sought to kill Jesus. The Jews then instigated a persecution against Jesus and actually sought to kill Him because He had done these things on the Sabbath. Our Lord’s reply to them is beautifully concise but increases their anger against Him. Calmly He says, “My Father worketh hitherto, and I work.” Of course, we all know that on that early seventh day it is recorded that “God ended His work which He had made; and He rested on the seventh day from all His work which He had made” (Gen 2:2). That, however, was rest from the work of creation and, as Dr. Gill writes, “He has continued to work ever since, on Sabbath days, as well as on other days; in upholding and governing the world, in continuing the species of beings, and all creatures in their being; in providing for them, and in dispensing the bounties of His providence to them; in causing His sun to shine, and showers of rain to descend on the earth; and in taking care of, and protecting even the meanest of His creatures.”



Flanigan, Jim

The Jews now sought the more to kill the Savior for He had not only, in their judgment, broken the Sabbath, but He had also called God His Father, thereby making Himself equal with God (John 5:18). It is important to observe that, to them, Sonship was equality. An objection of those who deny our Lord's eternal Sonship is that this would put Him in eternal subjection to the Father. Not so for the Jews, who rightly saw Sonship as implying equality.

As has already been noted, this miracle now gives rise to a lengthy discourse of the Lord Jesus, and it is interesting that in the shadow of the five porches of the Pool of Bethesda, this discourse goes on to present a five-fold equality of the Father and the Son.



Equal in Deity (v18)

This angered the Jews that He should say that God was His Father, making Himself equal with God. But the essential Deity, the Godhood, of our Lord Jesus is fundamental and is clearly taught in Scripture for those with open eyes and willing hearts to see and understand. As early as Genesis 1:1 there is an intimation of the great Triunity of Divine Persons for the great Name "God" in that verse is the Hebrew *Elohim* which is plural, and yet the verb "created" is singular. A plural name with a singular verb! How? Why? Here is a Triunity indeed, a holy unity and equality of three Persons in one Godhead, to be revealed later as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. They act in oneness, hence a singular verb. To this day, of course, it is a stumbling block to the Jews (and to many others too), that Jesus should be called the Son of God.



Equal in Purpose (v19)

Divine Persons work in perfect harmony. Neither will, nor can, act independently. How clearly the Son declares this when He says, "The Son can do nothing of Himself, but what He seeth the Father do: for

what things soever He doeth, these also doeth the Son likewise.” When our Lord came into the world He said, “Lo, I come ... I delight to do Thy will O My God” (Psa 40:7-8). He did that will; it cost Him much, but He did it perfectly, and He delighted to do it. In purpose, Divine Persons are essentially one.

Equal in Power (v21)

In that greatest of powers, the raising of the dead, Father and Son are equal: “For as the Father raiseth up the dead, and quickeneth them; even so the Son quickeneth whom He will.” Compare the well-known cases of the son of the widow of Nain (Luke 7), the daughter of Jairus (Luke 8), and the raising of Lazarus in John 11. See how the Savior “lifted up His eyes and said, ‘Father, I thank Thee that Thou hast heard Me. And I knew that Thou hearest Me always: but because of the people which stand by I said it, that they may believe that Thou hast sent Me’” (John 11:41-42). Father and Son were working together, and men should have known. And as it was then physically, so it is today spiritually for “you hath He quickened who were dead in trespasses and sins” (Eph 2:1).

Equal in Honor (v23)

So, the Savior says, and what a claim it is, “All men should honor the Son, even as they honor the Father. He that honoreth not the Son honoreth not the Father which hath sent Him.” How careful then must we be to ascribe equal honors to Father and Son. And so we sing, in the words of another

*All the Father's counsels claiming
Equal honors to the Son;
All the Son's effulgence beaming
Makes the Father's glory known*

-J. N. Darby



Equal in Essence (v26)

“For as the Father hath life in Himself; so hath He given to the Son to have life in Himself.” Note the importance of “life in Himself,” that is to say, the life of God is not derived from any other being or source. It is His essentially. And as it is with the Father, so it is with the Son; He hath life in Himself. In this essential life again, there is equality. This is why our God is called “the living God.” The gods of the nations were lifeless, they were dead gods who could neither hear nor speak, and those who had turned away from them on believing the gospel, like the Thessalonians, had “turned to serve the living and true God and to wait for His Son from heaven” (1Thes 1:9-10).

This is indeed a lengthy discourse and doubtless careful students will discover more five-fold testimonies to the Lord Jesus throughout its length, as, for instance, a five-fold witness to His greatness (vv31-39). There is, too, a five-fold gospel appeal and assurance in the five clauses which follow the “verily verily” in verse 24.

Those who study Bible numerals are slightly divided as to the significance of the number five. Some say that it always indicates man’s weakness. Others say that it indicates God’s grace. But is there much difference after all? Is not God’s grace shown where man is weak? And is not man’s weakness an occasion for God to display His grace? Perhaps the impotent man of Bethesda would concur with both of these. He lay in weakness until One came in grace to help him. He would certainly never forget the Blessed Man Who met him at that House of Mercy and gave him back his health and strength.



Flanigan, Jim

The name Bethphage occurs three times in the Gospels, but all the references are connected with the same event, so it may be said that we are concerned with but one mention of the village. See Matthew 21:1, Mark 11:1, and Luke 19:29.

Bethphage is a little village on the slopes of the Mount of Olives, very close to Bethany and reckoned to be the limit of a Sabbath day's journey from Jerusalem, about 2,000 cubits. It is universally agreed that the name means "The House of Figs," and the locality does indeed abound with fig trees, but perhaps the associations with the village are rather more significant than the meaning of the name, as will be seen.

At each mention of Bethphage it is noted that the Savior was on His way to Jerusalem. The events which are associated with Bethphage are quite remarkable, but nothing will, or can, deflect the Lord Jesus from His pathway to Jerusalem. There may be much adulation and apparent rejoicing as He leaves Bethphage, but He was on His resolute way to the city which would eventually be the place of His final suffering and rejection. He knew, before the time, all about the noisy welcome that there would be between Bethphage and Jerusalem, and He knew that this day would later be remembered as the day of His triumphant entry into Jerusalem. But determinedly, "He went before, ascending up to Jerusalem" (Luke 19:28). It has been well said that

*No unforeseen event
E'er took Him by surprise;
Toward the cross with fixed intent
He moved with open eyes.*

-I. Y. Ewan

In the pursuance of His plan He sent two of His disciples ahead, commissioning them to bring back to Him an ass with her colt. In

His omniscience He knew exactly where the two animals would be, tethered at a door where two ways met (Mark 11:4). The ass which He would use was one upon which never man had sat. It was an unbroken colt, but it would, without resistance, carry Him on His way. He was after all, the Lord of creation and if men did not recognize this, the creatures would. For 40 days just prior to the commencement of His ministry He had been with the beasts in the wilderness, and, as has been said, they left upon Him no mark of tooth or claw. The wild beasts had been His companions during those lonely desert days (Mark 1:13), and now an unbroken colt would carry Him obediently on His way to Jerusalem.

Notice again that instance of His omniscience. He knew who owned the ass and its colt. He knew where they would be, and He knew too that there would be an initial objection to the disciples loosing them and bringing them away, apparently without permission. But in His omnipotence, He was in complete control and instructed the disciples as to how they should answer any objection. "Say ye that the Lord hath need of him; and straightway he will send him hither" (Mark 11:3).

Then, there is that interesting little notice of our Lord's compassion and tenderness. How thoughtful He was. They would find an ass tied, and a colt with her. He said, "Bring them to me." One animal would suffice to carry Him into the city, but He would not separate the ass from her young and so they "brought the ass, and the colt" (Matt 21:7).

Albert Barnes has a helpful comment on this and writes "In Judea there were few horses and those were chiefly used in war. Men seldom employed them in common life, and in ordinary journeys. The ass, the mule, and the camel, are still most used in eastern countries. To ride on a horse was sometimes an emblem of war; on a mule and an ass the emblem of peace. Kings and princes commonly rode on them in times of peace; and it is mentioned as a mark of rank and dignity to ride in that manner (Judges 10:4; 12:14; 1Sam 25:20). Solomon, when he was inaugurated as king, rode on a mule, (1Kings 1:33). Riding in this manner, then, denoted neither poverty nor degradation, but was the appropriate way in which a king should ride,

and in which, therefore, the King of Zion should enter into His capital – the city of Jerusalem.”

What a privilege these people had when they put their garments upon the ass and set Jesus thereon, and others, not to be denied this privilege, spread their garments along the way, while yet others did the same with branches of palm trees (John 12:13). Palm branches were emblems of victory and peace, and they spread these in the way. They carpeted the dusty road which descends the Mount of Olives from Bethphage to the Kidron Valley and Jerusalem. It was a literal fulfilment of the injunction of John Baptist when he cried, “Prepare ye the way of the Lord” (Matt 3:3; Mark 1:3; Luke 3:4). If only there had been a similar preparation morally! But, sadly, the hearts and lives of most people remained totally unprepared to receive Messiah.

In emotional scenes of joy, the multitudes left Bethphage and crowded the narrow road which led to Jerusalem, the city of the great King. Though most would not be aware of it, prophecies were being fulfilled that day. It may have indeed seemed like a triumphal entry for Jesus into the city, but it would be short-lived, for soon He would be brought out of the city again bearing His cross, rejected, and on His lonely way to Golgotha.

We must however, consider those ancient predictions which were fulfilled so literally on that memorable journey from Bethphage to Jerusalem. But this will be for another meditation.



Flanigan, Jim

The road which leads from Bethphage and Bethany down toward Jerusalem is a narrow and exceedingly stony and dusty pathway. Normally it might be rather quiet and deserted, with only a few villagers trudging their lonely way to the city, but on this day, it was crowded and noisy. The King was on His way to Jerusalem and multitudes thronged His path.

As they descended Olivet and came near to the place now known as *Dominus Flevit*, meaning “the Lord wept,” the multitude of disciples began to rejoice and praise God, quoting the words of Psalm 118:26. From this point on the Mount of Olives, the whole city comes into view. It is a golden panorama as the city shines in the sun. To the disciples it was a beautiful sight but for the Savior it would soon bring tears.

Zechariah’s prophecy was already being fulfilled: “Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion; shout, O daughter of Jerusalem: behold, thy King cometh unto thee: He is just, and having salvation; lowly, and riding upon an ass, and upon a colt the foal of an ass” (Zech 9:9). Jesus Himself had so arranged it that His riding on an ass would be fulfilled at that time for it was after He had commissioned His disciples to go for the ass and its colt that it was written, “All this was done, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophet, saying, ‘Tell ye the daughter of Sion, Behold, thy King cometh unto thee, meek, and sitting upon an ass, and a colt the foal of an ass’” (Matt 21:4-5).

With the city now in view and within reach, many begin to chant the words already mentioned from Psalm 118:26. Soon, conscious of His rejection and His approaching death, Jesus Himself would sing these same words with His disciples in the Upper Room. They were the closing words of the great *Hallelsung* at the celebration of the Passover Feast and it is reasonable to believe that the Savior would indeed sing them on that last evening for it was when they had sung

an hymn, or Psalm, that they went out into the Mount of Olives, to Gethsemane.

To the words “Blessed be the King that cometh in the name of the Lord,” Luke adds, “Peace in heaven and glory in the highest.” This is similar to, but slightly different from, what the angelic host sang in Luke 2:14: “Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace.” How right it was that glory to God should come first, then peace on earth, at the birth of the Savior. However, now it is “peace in heaven and glory in the highest” (Luke 19:38). As ever, fault-finding Pharisees were lurking, mingling in the crowds, listening and watching. And they did indeed find fault. To Him they said, “Teacher, rebuke Thy disciples.” Doubtless what angered them was the cry of the crowds, “Hosanna to the Son of David: Blessed is He that cometh in the name of the Lord; Hosanna in the highest” (Matt 21:9). This was an acknowledgement that Jesus of Nazareth was the Son of David. It was an acknowledgement too that He was able to save, for such is the meaning of Hosanna. And they also attributed blessing to Him, as coming in the name of the Lord, thus eulogizing the Man Whom the Pharisees despised.

What a brief but powerful rebuke Jesus administered to them. “He answered and said unto them, I tell you that, if these should hold their peace, the stones would immediately cry out” (Luke 19:40). Again, as at other times, they were silenced, but by now the crowds had reached that place already mentioned, today familiar as *Dominus Flevit*.

Luke introduces the story with simple beauty, “And when He was come near, He beheld the city, and wept over it” (Luke 19:41).

The tears of Jesus are a touching study, and all His recorded tears were shed on the Mount of Olives. But what caused Him to weep here, when others were rejoicing and praising God? He tells us Himself. To the city He says, “If thou hadst known.” But they were blind to their awful future. In less than 40 years the Roman legions would encompass the city. They would be “kept in on every side,” besieged by the enemy. The city and the Temple would be mercilessly razed to the ground. Not one stone would be left upon another and

the inhabitants would be crushed by the might of Rome. It was all because they did not recognize Him, their Messiah. For the years that He lived among them it was a time of visitation, but they failed to appreciate Him; their wilful ignorance and unbelief would end in destruction.

How literally it was all fulfilled, as Josephus the historian describes so graphically. It is no wonder that Jesus wept. Such a beautiful sight they all saw as the golden city shone majestically across the Kidron. But He could see further than they and He wept over the doomed city.

The people of Bethphage would surely never forget the day when Jesus of Nazareth visited their village. They would reminisce and remember the multitudes that thronged their little road on that day. But would some live to see Calvary and watch the same Jesus hanging on a cross with His rightful title written above Him, “Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews”?

From the Bethphage-Jerusalem road the Savior entered the city and demonstrated His authority (Luke 19:45-47).



Flanigan, Jim

There are 11 references to Bethany in the four Gospels and the first mention, in Matthew 21:17, is very significant, “He left them, and went out of the city into Bethany; and He lodged there.” Out of the city ... into Bethany. The great Jerusalem had neither room nor time for the Savior, so He left them and went to the little village which made Him welcome. Of the one it would be said “there they crucified Him,” but of the other, “there they made Him a supper.”

Bethany is today known as Betania but there is not universal agreement as to the meaning of the name. Commentaries and Bible dictionaries offer different suggestions. Some say it means the House of Sorrow; some say it means the House of Singing. Others say the House of Sweetness, but the local people all agree that it means the House of the Poor. Perhaps there is a sense in which all of these have been true of Bethany. It did indeed become the House of Sorrow when bereavement came to the little family of Martha, Mary, and Lazarus. It was also a House of Sweetness when Mary broke her alabaster box of fragrant spikenard for the Savior. It was a House of Singing at its last mention in Luke 24 when the disciples watched the Risen Lord ascend through the heavens to become, as we love to call Him, the Man in the Glory. But the overall impression is that this little town had no material greatness or grandeur. It was indeed the House of the Poor.

Two chapters in particular have somehow made Bethany precious to the saints: John 11 and John 12. John 11 is a story of sorrow, sovereignty, sympathy, and supremacy. They seemed a happy little family until sorrow entered the home. Their brother Lazarus was ill. We learn that the choicest saints are not immune to sickness and sorrow. The sorrow of their brother being sick is compounded by the fact that Jesus was not with them. They knew, as they later declared, that if He had been there it would have been different. But sorrow was added to sorrow in that their Lord was at Bethabara beyond

Jordan where John had at first baptized (John 10:40). This was some 25 miles away, a journey of about two days. And still there was more sorrow; they sent for Jesus but He did not come. Then the crowning sorrow when Lazarus died; then the burial, and still the Master had not come.

Why did He deliberately delay? Note the word “therefore” in verse 6. “Now Jesus loved Martha, and her sister, and Lazarus. When He had heard, therefore, that he was sick, He abode two days still in the same place where He was.” He loved them, therefore He delayed, for in His sovereignty and love He had something greater in mind for them than the healing of their brother. It would be for the glory of God. How often it is said, and truly, that His delays are not denials. Eventually He came, and meeting Martha, then Mary, and the crowds of mourners who had come to comfort them, we have that amazing and touching spectacle of the Lord of glory weeping. It was true sympathy. He saw them weeping, and “Jesus wept.” Love weeps with those that weep (Rom 12:15).

But notice the different words for weeping. He saw Mary weeping and the Jews weeping. Here the word means sobbing aloud, or even wailing. Then Jesus wept, but this word is different. He shed silent tears. Someone has said, “The tears of God in the eyes of a Man.” And still we must remember that if He no longer sheds literal physical tears, yet His heart is just the same and He feels for His sorrowing people, touched with the feeling of their infirmities. Sympathy is therefore mingled with sovereignty as the Savior comes to Bethany, but His supremacy is now to be manifested.

“Where have ye laid Him?” He asks. Of course, in His omniscience He knew where they had laid him, but He will always involve His people in His work and so they take Him to the grave. It was sealed with a stone which He commands should be taken away. The practical Martha objects and to her objection the Savior replies that He had already told her that if only she would trust she would see the glory. What a message for each and all of us. In those times when we cannot understand His dealings with us His word to us is that if only we would trust, all would become clear.

They remove the stone and Jesus first of all lifts His eyes heavenward to speak briefly to His Father. "I thank Thee that thou hast heard Me." But this was no surprise that the Father should hear Him for, He says, "I know that Thou hearest Me always." His brief prayer was for the benefit of the crowds who stood around. It was to them evidence of His Sonship and of the intimacy between Him and His Father. What a sight they were now to see! "Lazarus, come forth," He cries. "And he that was dead came forth, bound hand and foot with graveclothes: and his face was bound about with a napkin."

It was truly an amazing sight. It was not a man climbing or clambering out of a sepulchre in his own strength. It was a man bound hand and foot and his face covered too. Miraculously, at the word of the Savior, death and the grave yielded up their prey and Lazarus must have literally floated out of his grave to stand upon the ground. "Jesus saith unto them, 'Loose him, and let him go.'" What a demonstration of His supremacy.

It is indeed a story of sorrow, sovereignty, sympathy, and supremacy, and is the grand prelude to the sweetness of the next chapter and the fragrance of Mary's worship and Martha's service. But that is another study.



Flanigan, Jim

Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany. For the week that followed He would lodge at Bethany and it was during that week that the well-known lovely scene of John 12 took place. It is nice to think that on that day, in that home in Bethany, a long-standing desire of the heart of Jehovah was fully met.

Centuries earlier God had determined to deliver His people from Egypt. His word to Pharaoh was “Let my people go that they may serve me ... Let My people go that they may hold a feast to Me ... Let My people go that they may sacrifice to Me.” He wanted service, fellowship, and worship from His redeemed people.

Sadly, He never fully received from them that for which He had delivered them. They failed to serve as they should. They denied Him the fellowship which He desired. And they did not worship Him as a redeemed people ought to have done.

Now, at Bethany, a few hearts that loved Him made Him a supper. There were of course, others at the table enjoying what had been prepared but the supper was for Him. He was central at the table and all was primarily for His honor, for Him Who had raised Lazarus from the dead.

Martha the practical woman was busy in service. Maybe indeed she was too busy, so that she was distracted with much serving, but the Lord never complained. In another place He just tenderly said, “Martha. Martha, thou art careful and troubled about many things” (Luke 10.41). But He must have appreciated her service to Him and to the others. How many dear brethren, and sisters, are like Martha, so busy in service, perhaps even wearied in it though never wearied of it as they faithfully serve Him Whom they love.

Lazarus never speaks. In all that we know of him, in all that has been recorded, there is never a word from him. But he was there, sitting in his place at the table, quietly enjoying the fellowship. Again, how

many are like the quiet Lazarus, never heard, never vocal, but always there, enjoying the fellowship of the Savior and His people. Perhaps it would have been nice to hear something from Lazarus, as it would be good to hear the voices of many dear brethren who sit quietly, always present at the meetings but never partaking audibly.

Mary is there too, and what an example she gives us. “Then took Mary a pound of ointment of spikenard, very costly, and anointed the feet of Jesus, and wiped His feet with her hair: and the house was filled with the odor of the ointment.” Spikenard was pure liquid nard, unadulterated. Sometimes men blended the nard with lesser expensive balsams to reduce the cost. Mary’s spikenard was pure. It was costly. It was precious, and the fragrance filled not only the room but the house. So, it is with worship. It may cost something in preparation. It may be “the sacrifice of praise” (Heb 13:15). But He appreciates it.

So, then it is in the house at Bethany that the Lord Jesus is enjoying that which Jehovah had long ago desired, service, fellowship, and worship.

It is often pointed out that Mary of Bethany is always at the Savior’s feet. She is at His feet in Luke 10, in John 11, and again in John 12. In Luke 10 she is learning; in John 11 she is weeping; in John 12 she is worshipping. She is learning at the feet of the Prophet. She is weeping at the feet of the Priest. She is worshipping at the feet of the King. How well Mary knew the Lord and how much He appreciated her devotion.

“Let her alone,” He said, when others criticized her. Mary knew more than many of them. She had sat at His feet, quietly listening and learning and she realized that He was indeed going to die. She had that costly pound of spikenard reserved for Him, for the day of His burial. But as she continued to listen she seemed to grasp that He would indeed rise again. In that case He would not really need her embalming ointment. But she would not be cheated out of her intention to pour it upon Him. She had kept it for that purpose. Why did she not pour it upon her brother Lazarus when he died? She was keeping it for Him Whom she loved even more than her brother.

So, if He would not need her spikenard in death, she would pour it upon Him now, while He lived, and so she did. It was worship indeed.

Now if the odor filled the room and the house, it must have clung to Mary herself. She was left fragrant with that which she had bestowed upon her Lord. So, it is with worship. The sweetness of our exercise should stay with us as we move about among others.

Again, what a lovely thought that such was the potency of the precious spikenard that the garments of the Savior must have been fragrant with it too. We are told it lingered for days. Were His garments still fragrant with it when soldiers handled Him so cruelly and irreverently stripped Him of His clothing? And when they finally gambled for His raiment did those men, who divided the garments among themselves, carry away that which even then smelled of Mary's worship?

Who can tell the end of true worship? Worship is, in the words of Mr. Darby, "The honor and adoration rendered to God for what He is in Himself, and for what He means to those who render it." May our assemblies be truly like Bethany, with service, fellowship, and worship for Him Whom we love.

It is perhaps not to be wondered at that when the time came for our Lord to leave earth and return to glory, "He led them out as far as to Bethany." He would return to the heavens from the little place which had made room for Him on earth when so many others had rejected Him. "And He lifted up His hands and blessed them. And it came to pass, while He blessed them, He was parted from them, and carried up into heaven. And they worshiped Him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy. And were continually in the temple, praising and blessing God" (Luke 24:50-53). It had been a long pathway from Bethlehem to Bethany, but it was a perfect pathway for He was a Perfect Man.