

IV. LITERARY KEYS TO THE FOURTH GOSPEL

The Imagery of John

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THE EXACT expression of truth in intelligible fashion is always difficult. General truth is best formulated in abstractions which will encompass any given situation, but abstractions are not comprehensible to the uninitiated. Einstein's famous formula, $E=MC^2$, embraces a wide range of mathematical and physical principles, but it is meaningless to those who do not instantly recognize the significance of its terms. The truths by which men live must be specific to be understandable, and they become so only through imagery which will embody abstract principles in common objects or actions.

The Gospel of John contains some of the profoundest truth in the New Testament, but there are no other writings which express it more simply. The imagery is clear, concise, and rather limited. The author employs a restricted vocabulary to convey his thought, but each word is filled with spiritual significance. His metaphors are frequently repeated, and some of them become technical theological terms because of their constant occurrence in his teaching.

The main truths with which this Gospel deals are transmitted by less than two dozen terms, each of which has some definite symbolic meaning. Among the most important of these are "light," "darkness," "bread," "water," "birth," "sleep," "flesh," "eating," "drinking," "shepherd," "sheep," "vine," "Father" (God), "Son of God," and "Son of man." Others like "bride and bridegroom," "thieves and robbers," "dwelling-places" (A.V. "mansions"), "grain of wheat," and "road" (way) are used only once. No conclusions can be drawn from their distribution in the text, for most of these appear irregu-

larly, and do not represent a complete continuum of thought. Except for "Father," the title of God, and the corresponding titles of Christ, "Son of God," and "Son of man," they are illustrative rather than didactic.

Certain characteristics of this imagery are immediately apparent. Whether judged by present standards or by those of the day in which the Gospel was written, these metaphors are familiar to all peoples and places. Some of them, like "sheep," "shepherd," and "vine," belong essentially to a pastoral civilization; a few, like "bridegroom," "thief," or "bond-servant," concern social position; "birth," "sleep," "eating," and "drinking" are common human actions; "water" and "bread" are staples of sustenance in any culture; "light" and "darkness" are concepts with universal connotations of good and evil ; and the titles "Father," "Son of God," and "Son of man" are fairly obvious in meaning though they may have theological overtones. There are numerous other terms that are peculiar to the Johannine vocabulary, but they cannot be classed as figures of speech.

With a few exceptions such as the new birth, which pertains to a phase of individual experience, the majority of these figures are applied to Christ Himself. He is the light of the world (8:12), the living water (4:14), the bread of life (6:35), the good shepherd (10:11), the true vine (15:1), the Son of God (10:36). Each explains some aspect of His ministry to men and enhances the understanding of the incarnation.

The figures of light and darkness define the plot of the Gospel, for they represent the opposing powers of righteousness and evil, and the contrasting results of belief and unbelief. In the introductory words of the Prologue the light is the life that was manifested in Christ. Through Him the divine radiance was focused on the world as a searchlight plays on a dark landscape (1:4-5). That light, although in some corners it might be dim and undefined, was nevertheless the light of men. However vague and distorted truth might become, even in perverted form it owed its origin to the primal revelation of God. Sin and its consequent estrangement may have produced a twilight in which the way of life had become obscure, but Christ had provided the illumination necessary to lead men back to God.

If the light did not reach them, it was because they rejected it. "Men loved the darkness rather than the light, for their works were evil" (3:19). Jesus, however, claimed that He was the light of the world, and that those who followed Him should not walk in the darkness (8:12). The chief example of this principle is the healing of the man born blind. Jesus said as He confronted the helpless victim of fate, "When I am in the world, I am the light of the world" (9:5). By the cure that He effected the man was delivered from the darkness of futility and ignorance, and acquired a new purpose.

Light is also a direction. After Lazarus' death, Jesus turned back to Bethany, and His disciples warned Him that He would jeopardize His life by appearing in the environs of Jerusalem. They assumed that He was ignorant of the true situation, and that He was taking a foolish risk. Jesus replied: "Are there not twelve hours in the day? If a man walk in the day, he stumbleth not because he seeth the light of this world" (11:10). Confident that He was walking in the light of God's plan for His life, He did not deviate from the path of duty, even though it involved peril.

To a bewildered multitude who could not properly assess His claims Jesus said: "Yet a little while is the light among you. Walk while ye have the light, that darkness overtake you not: and he that walketh in darkness knoweth not whither he goeth" (12:35).

Although the figure of the Prologue (1:4-5) reappears only sporadically in the rest of the Gospel, the underlying concept is apparent on every page. Silently but pervasively in every contact that Jesus made, He penetrated the dark recesses of the human spirit and revealed its true character. The light of His holiness disclosed hidden hypocrisy and sin in sharp relief, banished the shadows of ignorance, superseded confusion by understanding, and dispelled sorrow. Every sign that He performed was a manifestation of the light that was in Him illumining the darkness of the world.

The parallel figure of darkness (1:5) represents uncertainty, ignorance, and separation from God (12:35, 46). The conflict of light and darkness constitutes the plot of John. The early chapters of the Gospel describe the shining of the light into the lives of different persons whose darkness is pierced

by the revelation of God in Christ. Resistance to this revelation is the reaction of darkness that does not wish to be disturbed or convicted. The rising hostility of Jesus, culminating in the crucifixion, seemed to mark the triumph of the darkness, for justice was frustrated, and evil prevailed over good. The death of Jesus apparently involved the denial of His claims and the defeat of righteousness.

If the cross had been the conclusion of the Gospel, a philosophy of despair would be warranted. One would be forced to conclude that virtue is unrewarded, that selfishness and malice can strike their victims with impunity, and that there is no everlasting standard of righteousness. The universe would dissolve into moral chaos, and pessimism would be the inevitable mood of all reasoning men. The resurrection, however, brought the vindication of the claims of Christ, and once for all confuted His enemies. The life in Him, which overcame death, proved to be "the light of men."

Two common staples of life, water and bread, are illustrative of the indispensability of Christ to the believer. According to the words of Jesus, both were emblematic of eternal life (4:14; 6:51, 54). On two occasions He used the metaphor of water to convey this truth: once to the woman who came to the well of Sychar to draw water for her household (4:10-15)! and once to the crowd at the Feast of Tabernacles when they assembled at the temple for the ceremonial pouring of the libation. To the Samaritan woman water was a physical necessity which Jesus used as a picture of the satisfaction for her spiritual dearth. She had vainly tried to compensate for an empty life by emotional indulgence, and had gained only discontentment and bitterness. Jesus offered her an un-failing spring of joy, constantly pouring out refreshing life. In contrast to the external religiosity which she had acquired by hearsay, she could receive a spontaneous joy by believing in Him.

The symbol of the libation at the Feast of Tabernacles memorialized God's provision for His people in the wilderness. The ritual celebration had become an empty tradition which conferred no individual spiritual potency. The pilgrims went home from the feast without a consciousness of reality; they were still "thirsty." To those who craved an inward

sufficiency in place of an empty and unproductive life, Jesus promised the gift of the Holy Spirit. Like the streams of water that turn the empty watercourse into a powerful river, and that make wasteland fruitful, the Spirit of God imparts energy and usefulness to barren souls.

The metaphor of the bread of life was taken from the feeding of the five thousand, which immediately preceded the discourse in the synagogue of Capernaum. The discussion of the topic was restricted to this one occasion (6:31-35, 41, 48-51, 58). Unlike the manna given by Moses, which afforded temporary sustenance for the Israelites during the wandering in the wilderness, Jesus asserted that He could impart eternal life to those who partook of Him. By insisting that He must be "eaten" (6 :53) He expanded the concept of belief. Bread must not only be appropriated, but must be assimilated to provide nutriment. In like fashion, He must participate in the believer's life to make His vitality effective.

The Gospel of John contains no parables such as are found in the Synoptics. There are only two extended metaphors that resemble the teachings found in Matthew 13 and kindred passages, the figures of the good shepherd and the true vine, both of which deal with functions of Jesus' person rather than with stories of others.

The likeness of the good shepherd depicts Jesus' authority. He has the right to enter the fold at any time (John 10:2-3), and He commands the attention of the sheep. They follow Him, for they trust His leadership. In contrast to the thieves and robbers, who represent enemies, and to the hirelings, who are careless and selfish guardians, He is deeply concerned for the safety of the flock, and lays down His life for them (10 :8-11). Through this figure Jesus conveyed the concept of His atoning work (10:11, 15). His death was not an accident, but a deliberate sacrifice to assure the defense and welfare of those committed to His care by the Father. Although certain characteristics of the sheep are mentioned, the primary purpose of this imagery seems to be the explanation of the shepherd's attitude and office. Both his compassion for them, and his sovereignty over them are stressed.

Whereas the teaching on the good shepherd magnifies the qualities and powers of the Master, the figure of the vine

places greater emphasis on the needs and responsibilities of the disciples. The dominant position of Christ is stated in the initial sentence, "I am the true [real] vine" (15:1). The purity and vigor of the original stock is of prime importance, for no vine can produce better fruit than its nature will create. Christ is the ultimate source of the Christian life, since its vitality and incentive are derived from Him. The greater part of the discourse on the vine concerns the function of the disciples. In order to bear fruit they must maintain a direct connection with the stock, which supplies their nourishment. Dead wood, which can never be productive, and which may harbor disease, must be removed, and even the live shoots must be pruned in order that they may yield a larger crop.

The symbols of the shepherd and the vine summarize the objective and subjective aspects of the Christian life. In the parable of the good shepherd the prominent pronoun is "I," for the Lord is speaking of His work in guarding the sheep whom the Father has committed to Him, and whom He has purchased by the price of His own life. In the repeated assertions, "I am the door . . .," "I know the Father," "I lay down my life that I may take it again," "I have power to lay it down and power to take it again," Jesus declared His competence to effect the salvation of the disciples. He assumed sole responsibility for their welfare.

The discourse on the vine emphasizes the duty of the branches to maintain their union with the stem and to produce fruit in increasing quantity. By the use of the pronoun "ye" the Lord taught the necessity of a conscious active relation with Him at all times, expressed in the verbs "abide" and "keep" (my commandments). Fellowship and obedience, the conditions of fruitfulness, must be fulfilled by the disciples themselves. Without these qualities life is barren and useless.

Unlike the parables of the Synoptic Gospels which deal with specific aspects of spiritual truth, such as prayer, the growth of the kingdom of God and the final judgment, these two Johannine parables are concerned with the general concept of life in Christ. They embrace the totality of experience by portraying Christ's redemption of the believer, and the believer's service to Christ.

The physiological metaphors of birth, eating, and sleep

cover the progression of Christian experience. The new birth marks its beginning: "Except one be born anew, he cannot see the kingdom of God" (3:3). The initial impartation of life, derived from the Holy Spirit, and granted in response to faith, is the first step toward God. As one enters a human family through birth, because life has been engendered by the parents, so one enters the kingdom of God because of a new nature imparted by the heavenly Father. Spiritual vitality is derived from God, not developed by human initiative.

As already indicated above, the new life must be sustained by "eating" Christ, which involves a constant feeding upon Him as the bread of life (6:33). He becomes an integral part of the believer's being, so that the elements of His personality appear in the character of the Christian. As food sustains and replenishes the tissues of the body, Christ renews the inward spirit. The feeding is a constant process, for unless the spirit is nourished continually, it will lose its vitality.

"Sleep" was Jesus' figure for the end of physical life, for He announced the death of Lazarus by saying, "Our friend Lazarus is fallen asleep; but I go, that I may awake him out of sleep" (11:11). He regarded death as a temporary state prior to a permanent awakening in the resurrection. While His language denotes a cessation of communication by the deceased person, it does not imply total unconsciousness nor terminus of existence. "Sleep" describes death in terms of appearance, not of reality, and as sleep presupposes an awakening, so the death of a believer must be followed by a return to life (John 11:25).

The last three important images in the Gospel are related to the personal revelation of God. They are properly titles rather than metaphors, yet the metaphorical sense underlying them demands definition. "Father" was Jesus' favorite name for God. "The Father" as a title of deity occurs 109 times; "My Father," 22 times. The word connotes oneness of nature, source of origin, intimacy of fellowship, and sovereign direction, while the phrase "My Father" predicates a unique relationship between Christ and God that human experience cannot duplicate. The resultant picture of deity differs from that of any other religion. God is a sovereign, but not a despot; He is transcendent, but not impersonal; He is holy, but not

hostile to sinners. Jesus said, "The Father himself loveth you" (16:27), and asserted that God would be the Father of believers as well as of Himself. The establishment of this relation occurs in the new birth, by which men enter into the spiritual family of God, and realize the kinship which this Gospel describes (1:12-13).

The relationship of Christ to the Father is expressed by the phrase, "Son of God." At the outset of His ministry John the Baptist introduced Him in this fashion (1:34), and in every succeeding section of the Gospel the same title appears. It was applied to Christ by two of His disciples, Nathanael, who saluted Him as "Son of God and King of Israel" at their first meeting (1:49), and by Martha in her confession of faith before the raising of Lazarus (11:27). Jesus' authority to raise the dead (5:25), His position as the chosen messenger of God (10:36), and the assurance that He would respond to the petitions of His disciples (14:13) are founded on His sonship. The condemnation of his enemies (19:7) and the final creed of the author (20:31) are both summarized in this appellation.

This sonship implied a community of nature surpassing any ordinary human ties. Between Jesus and the Father there existed a specially close bond of mutual understanding and love. Jesus never spoke of "our Father" as if His status with God were identical with that of others. In addressing Mary Magdalene He said, "I ascend unto my Father and your Father, and my God and your God" (20:17). To both Jesus and Mary God was the same person, but the fatherhood of God had a different meaning for Jesus than it had for Mary. While it is true that all believers are "children of God" (1:12), only Christ could rightfully be called "the Son."

"Son of Man" is applied to Christ as the expression of perfect humanity. He may have drawn the title from the Psalms where it is used generically of any member of the human race: "What is man, that thou art mindful of him? and the son of man, that thou visitest him?" (Ps. 8:4). In the Gospel the title is connected with Jesus' mediatorial work because He represents men as one of their company. Because He is truly human, He is qualified to be the messenger through whom the needs of men are reported to God. Like the ladder

in Jacob's dream at Bethel (Gen. 28:22), He is the bridge between man and God (John 1:51), and He will ascend into heaven as the Son of Man to bring humanity into the divine presence (3:13; 6:62) .

In the capacity of Son of Man he imparts eternal life to believers. His flesh and blood become meat and drink (6:27, 53) for those who are spiritually impoverished. Like a blood transfusion which flows from, the healthy to the sick, the life of Christ is transmitted to those who enter into vital contact with Him.

As the Son of Man he is "lifted up" (8:28; 12:23-34) on the cross to achieve victory over the prince of this world and to draw all men unto Himself. In this climactic act He is "glorified" (13 :31), for He thus opens a way into the presence of God, and establishes the right of others to follow Him (17:1-2, 24).

The imagery of John, though limited to certain concepts and expressed in a fixed vocabulary, is integrated with the total theme of the Gospel. It expresses the conflict of good with evil, culminating in the incarnation and death of Christ, who brought light into darkness, and, though He suffered death, was not overcome by it. He revealed the person of the Father, and showed how through the new birth believers might become members of His family. Christian experience is summed up in the metaphors of the vitalism of the new birth, the security of the sheepfold, the productiveness of the vine, the termination in the sleep of death that is only temporary because there will be an awakening in the resurrection. The water of life and the bread of life are emblematic of Christ's sufficiency for all needs. Through these pictorial media the Gospel of John explains the meaning of eternal life.

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