

*THE LIFE OF CHRIST ACCORDING TO ST.  
MARK.<sup>1</sup>*

XXXI. LAST DAYS IN GALILEE, IX. 30-50.<sup>1</sup>

JESUS' recent experiences had all been preparing the way for the declaration of His Messiahship and the tragic end of His ministry. But His hour had not yet come; He had chosen the ensuing Passover at Jerusalem as the occasion of His sacrifice, in order that the vast assembly of Jewish pilgrims might be witnesses, and that the place and time might help to set forth the significance of the crowning act of His life. But some considerable interval had still to elapse before the Passover, and it might seem at first sight as if Peter's confession, the Transfiguration, and the announcement of the Passion had brought matters to a crisis with the disciples prematurely. Jesus had resolved on a step which must lead to His death; He had solemnly pledged Himself to the disciples, and yet weeks must intervene before He could give effect to His resolution. This long suspense would dissipate any energy due merely to moments of highly wrought enthusiasm; the fervour of excitement would disappear as day after day went by, and Jesus again and again contemplated in cold blood the grim realities of His future. Yet He went forward without haste and without hesitation, still quietly preparing for His decisive visit to Jerusalem. His Sacrifice was deliberate, premeditated, prepared for and waited for in the abiding strength of God.

This last journey took Him in the first instance through Galilee, and in the course of it He visited Capernaum. He kept His movements secret, lest He should fall into the

<sup>1</sup> These studies are not a complete doctrinal or historical account of Christ, but simply an attempt to set forth the impression which the Gospel of St. Mark, taken by itself, would make upon a reader who had no other source of information.

hands of His enemies, and His plans should be thwarted: "He desired that no one should know" that He was in Galilee. He now wandered a proscribed fugitive, where He had once been the idol of admiring crowds. In this nadir of His fortunes the most trifling token of faith or kindly feeling was welcome, and was counted as meritorious. John told Him of an exorcist who cast out demons by His name, not through any spiritual faith, but because he regarded the Name as a potent spell. He had refused to associate himself with the disciples, and they had forbidden him to use the Name. But Jesus answered them, "Do not hinder him; no one is likely to do a mighty work in My name, and then speak evil of Me. Every one who is not against you is for you." Time had been when Jesus sat at rich men's feasts, but now a cup of water bestowed on one of His followers for His sake would deserve gratitude and recompense.

In this desperate extremity, the sole gleam of comfort came, strangely enough, from the selfish ambition of the disciples. They might misunderstand their Master, but they still believed in Him; they were still so confident about the coming of the Kingdom, that they thought it worth while to dispute who should be the greatest in the new era. At that time, most men with any reputation for practical good sense would have laughed contemptuously at such aspirations, and bidden the disciples "dispute, more reasonably wrong, the ordering of a shipwreck."

Nevertheless these days were no mere period of painful suspense; Jesus still laboured anxiously to prepare His disciples for the end. The only reason which St. Mark expressly gives for secrecy is that He desired to teach the disciples concerning His death and resurrection; but, adds the Evangelist, "they did not understand, and were afraid to ask." Instead of asking, they left Jesus to Himself, and recurred amongst themselves, as we have seen, to the more

congenial topic of the relative dignity of the high offices they were to fill in the kingdom. Jesus, however, was not so preoccupied with His own fortunes as to overlook their dispute. When they reached their lodging, He asked them what they had been discussing, and they were ashamed to tell Him; nevertheless He decided their controversy thus: "If any man desire to be first, he shall be last of all, and servant of all."

St. Mark gives in this connexion certain sayings about children. Jesus took a little child, set him in the midst, and took him in His arms and said, "He who receives a little child like this in My name receives Me, and he who receives Me, receives not Me, but Him that sent Me." Further on, separately, "If any one cause one of the little ones who believe on Me to stumble, it were better for him if a great millstone were hanged about his neck, and he were cast into the sea." This act and these sayings may be symbolic; the child and the believing little ones may represent humble, simple-minded believers in contrast to the Apostles, who were clear that they were great, and only doubtful which was the greatest. Or the second saying may be quite independent, and have no reference to the dispute as to who was greatest. The "believing little ones" may describe the disciples generally as men of small account in the world's esteem. But it would be quite in accordance with St. Mark's description of the character and teaching of Jesus to understand these sayings literally of children. Here and elsewhere we see that Jesus was fond of children, and they must have been fond of Him; they could not have resisted His winsomeness. In these dark days the persecuted Prophet found much comfort in the artless and affectionate confidence of children, and His thoughts turned to their part in the kingdom. He was not thinking of the acceptance of doctrines as to His person and work; the "belief" of "the little ones" was

their trustful love for Him. He was indignant at the possibility that they might be turned away from the kingdom, perhaps by the selfish harshness of His own disciples, and He bade them receive children as they would receive their Master, or even God Himself. In the record as St. Mark gives it, the Apostles are rebuked by the contrast between their contentious ambition and a child's disinterested affection.

St. Mark assigns other sayings to this last visit to Galilee; we cannot be sure of their connexion, as they are arranged on mnemonic principles, a group about stumbling-blocks, and another whose key-words are "salt," and "fire." Again, Jesus insists that loyalty to Himself may demand the most painful sacrifices—hand, foot, or eye—yet it is better to endure such losses than to be shut out of the kingdom, and cast into "Gehenna, the unquenchable fire, where the worm never dies." His anticipations of coming trial which may purify and redeem is also expressed in the words, "Everything must be salted with fire"; and by a verbal connexion we have a saying that "Salt is good, but if the salt have become saltless, wherewith shall ye season it?" If the Apostles, who were to be ministers of redemption, fell away, how could they be redeemed? The section ends with a reference to the dispute on the way to Capernaum, "Be at peace with one another."

The brief record of the last visit to Galilee reflects in every phrase the anxiety and gloom of those days, and the calm persistence with which Jesus prepared for His final entry into Jerusalem.

#### XXXII. THE MINISTRY BEYOND THE JORDAN, X. 1-31.

After a while Jesus left Galilee, and crossing the Jordan came to the Eastern districts opposite Judæa. He now felt safer than in Galilee. The Eastern borderlands were

less settled : the population was largely Gentile, and partly under the direct government of Rome. There was less opportunity for official persecution or popular fanaticism, and the desert offered a refuge from danger. Hence Jesus resumed His public ministry. Once more crowds gathered round Him, and He taught them after His old fashion. Thus the coming of the Kingdom was proclaimed in yet another district<sup>1</sup> of the Holy Land. The reminiscences of this ministry are brief, fragmentary, and disconnected accounts of special episodes. Doubtless the burden of His public preaching was the same as in earlier days. We have recorded

(a) *A Discussion with the Pharisees as to Divorce, 2-12.* It soon appeared that Jesus' enemies had not forgotten Him in His period of retirement ; Pharisees soon appeared again amongst His hearers, and sought to draw from Him heretical utterances which might furnish grounds of accusation. Indiscriminate divorce was as great an evil amongst the Jews of those days as it is in some of the United States to-day ; and Jesus, apparently, had spoken strongly against this abuse. The practice was justified by giving a very wide interpretation to the ordinance.<sup>2</sup> "When a man hath taken a wife, and married her, and she find no favour in his eyes, because he hath found some uncleanness in her : then let him write her a bill of divorcement, and give it in her hand, and send her out of his house. When she has left his house, she may go and marry another man." Hence the Pharisees approached Him on this subject in the confident hope of eliciting some blasphemous<sup>3</sup> criticism of the Law. They were not disappointed. They asked Him in the first instance if divorce were lawful ; and He referred them to Moses. "Moses," said they, "directed that a bill

<sup>1</sup> As far as St. Mark's narrative is concerned.

<sup>2</sup> Deuteronomy xxiv. 1.

<sup>3</sup> From their point of view.

of divorce should be written, and the woman put away." Jesus in fact had played into their hands by His question; any condemnation of divorce now would be a deliberate and avowed contradiction of Moses—at least so it seemed. But Jesus answered, "Moses wrote this ordinance with a view to your hardness of heart," but the story of the Creation, He continued, shows that the union of man and woman in marriage was an act of God, which man must not undo.

Since Jesus had repudiated the Mosaic law of clean and unclean meats, He had thought out the principle which enabled Him to accept the Pentateuch as a Divine Revelation, and yet to annul it. The Law was a temporary provision for an imperfect people; not, as the Jews proudly believed, the eternal glory and privilege of Israel, but in some respects the brand of their shame. Ordinances ethically defective implied moral inferiority in the people; they were incapable of appreciating or profiting by any higher law. Thus the honour of Moses was saved at the expense of Israel and the Law; nevertheless, the blasphemy was equally horrible in the eyes of the Pharisees.

When He and His disciples were again alone together, He formulated His views in express contradiction to Deuteronomy, "Whosoever putteth away his wife and marrieth another, committeth adultery with her: and if a wife putteth away her husband, and is married to some one else, she committeth adultery."

(b) *Jesus blesses Children*, 13-16. The next incident confirms what was said in the last section of Jesus and children. Some little children, hardly more than babies, were brought to Him that He might touch them; the touch of so great a prophet would have magic in it, and make them strong and healthy. But the Apostles intervened; the renewed popularity of Jesus' ministry made

them more certain than ever that the manifestation of His Messianic glory was near at hand ; and it was beneath the dignity of the Messiah that He should be troubled by the foolish importunity of fond parents. But Jesus was vexed at the mistaken zeal of His followers, and said, "Suffer the little children to come unto Me, and forbid them not, for of such is the Kingdom of God ; verily, I say unto you, no one shall enter into the Kingdom of God, who does not receive it as a little child." And He took them in His arms and laid His hands on them, and blessed them.

(c) *A Rich Man refuses to make such Sacrifice as had been made by the Apostles, 17-31.* The next episode is one of the few recorded interviews between Jesus and men of wealth and position. Once, as Jesus and His disciples were starting out for their day's journey, they were arrested by a man who came running in eager haste, lest Jesus should have departed before he could reach Him. Experience suggested that he was the friend of some sufferer, and came to beg Jesus to perform an act of healing. But no, for the first time in the narrative we hear of some one seeking spiritual teaching. The man fell on his knees and asked, "Good Teacher, what am I to do to inherit eternal life?" Somehow the word "good" jarred upon Jesus. "Why," said He, "do you call me 'good' ? No one is good except one, God." Probably the word in the man's mouth was a mere conventional courtesy. Had it been intended in its full sense, it would have implied a recognition of the Messiahship, the Divine Sonship of Jesus ; His question was perhaps meant to elicit a confession of faith in His mission. But possibly special stress was laid upon "good," such as might be represented by "Teacher, holy, saintly man !" The better anyone is, the less he tolerates such forms of address. There is no question of the low moral standard of sinlessness in its popular meaning of

freedom from positive wrongdoing. But men of high spiritual attainments, because they are advanced and exalted, see infinite possibilities still before them; so that to accept the epithet "good" in its absolute sense would be a despairing denial of their own spiritual future.

But Jesus' words about Himself met with no response; and He went on at once to deal with the inquirer's question: "Thou knowest the commandments, Do not commit adultery; do not murder; do not steal; do not bear false witness; defraud not; honour thy father and mother"—another challenge to faith, "You know the Law; has it failed to help you, and are you seeking from Me the help which the Law cannot give?" "Teacher," the man answered, "I have observed all these from my youth"; admitting, therefore, that the Law had failed, and implying that Jesus might be a source of larger truth and grace. Something in his tone and manner touched the heart of Jesus, and looking intently at him, He loved him. Since the early days of His ministry, He had not addressed to any one the special call to join the inner circle of His followers, the Apostles; but this man had so won Him that He bade him supply the one thing that was lacking, which the Law had not been able to do for him, by selling his property, distributing it to the poor, and joining the followers of Jesus. By so doing he would secure treasure in heaven; but in accepting discipleship he would be taking up his cross. The one thing he lacked was personal surrender to Jesus, whereby he would secure an entrance into the Kingdom of God, wherein alone there was eternal life. The call to apostleship involved the abandonment of worldly goods for him, as for the original Twelve; but the condition was emphasized because he was rich, and such a sacrifice meant much more to him than it did to them. Moreover the invitation was a call to martyrdom; Jesus was going consciously and deliberately to His death; His



movements were no longer secret; He again courted publicity, and seemed to have entered on a triumphal progress to Jerusalem. Once more His enemies dogged His steps, and observed His sayings and doings with malignant eyes. His followers, men would suppose, must share His fate; and even if there was some chance that obscure Galileans might escape, this new and distinguished convert who had joined Jesus after his public repudiation of the Law, this wealthy proprietor from the neighbourhood of Jerusalem, would be a marked man. His acceptance of Jesus' call would indeed have been taking up his cross; and on the way to the scaffold a man may cheerfully distribute his possessions among the crowd. But the Teacher and His would-be disciple were at cross purposes. Jesus spoke in the light of His coming death and its consequences to His followers; but the rich man, like the Apostles, understood nothing of this. He had come to a great prophet, popular and influential, who might possibly be the Messiah, so that suggestions of imminent calamity fell upon unheeding ears. All that he grasped was that the sacrifice of all he had was demanded as the price of eternal life; and as he listened his countenance fell, and he went away disappointed, for he was very wealthy.

Meanwhile the disciples stood by, watching the scene with eager interest. Hitherto the followers of Jesus had consisted of the poor and people of the lower middle-class; now, it seemed, they might be reinforced by a wealthy convert, a valuable accession, and also a dangerous competitor for leadership. But Jesus had imposed difficult conditions, and the possible recruit was lost; and the Master looked round on His disciples, and said, "How hard it is for those who have property to enter into the Kingdom of God." And the disciples were astonished; in this life entrance into the best society is easy for the rich. Jesus explained further, "Children, how hard it is for those

who put their trust in riches to enter into the Kingdom of God. It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter into the Kingdom of God." The disciples were still more astonished—they seem to have been brought up to respect wealthy men—"Who then," said they, "can be saved?" Jesus, however, explained that He did not mean literally that no rich man could be saved, humanly speaking it was impossible, but might be accomplished by the special grace of God, for all things were possible with God. By this time the disciples had begun to consider the matter from the point of view of their own personal merits; and Peter said, "Behold, we gave up everything, and followed Thee." If this new comer has not faith enough in his "good Teacher" to sacrifice his wealth, you still have the devoted followers who did not hesitate to leave for your sake boats and nets, and comfortable posts in the custom house.

Jesus answered, "Verily I say unto you, there is no one who for my sake, and for the sake of the Good Tidings, has left house, or brothers, or sisters, or father, or mother, or children, who shall not receive a hundredfold now at this time," in this present dispensation, "houses, brethren, sisters, mothers, children, and lands, with persecutions, and in the coming age," the new dispensation, "eternal life." The wording of this answer shows that it is not a commercial contract guaranteeing a certain profit; the loss of a mother cannot literally be compensated for by the gift of a hundred mothers; and the victims of persecution would not be left in possession of hundreds of houses and estates. There is a note of grave irony, as if Jesus discerned that Peter's anxiety lest his material sacrifices should be forgotten was partly inspired by the hope of material compensation. He had been trying for weeks to prepare His disciples for His coming death; and their insistence on the cost of their loyalty struck a harsh and

discordant note. It was as if on the eve of Thermopylæ the Spartans had clamoured to Leonidas for arrears of pay. Yet Jesus had answered with kindly forbearance, and veiled His rebuke in enigmatic language whose meaning only slowly dawned on His hearers. Indeed we have no complete solution of the enigma now. The general sense, however, is clear, "Do not be afraid that you have made a bad bargain; even now, in the midst of presecution, you have a larger enjoyment of the ordinary blessings of life than you could have derived from the good things you have sacrificed; and you shall have that eternal life which the rich man sought but was not willing to purchase at the expense of his wealth." But He ended with a word of frank warning, "Many that are first shall be last; and the last first."

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