

S. D. GORDON



**QUIET
TALKS
ON JOHN'S
GOSPEL**

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John's Story

"I fled Him, down the nights and down the days;
I fled Him, down the arches of the years;
I fled Him down the labyrinthine ways
Of my own mind; and in the midst of tears
I hid from Him, and under running laughter.
Up vistaed hopes, I sped;
And shot, precipitated,
Adown Titanic glooms of chasméd fears,
From those strong Feet that followed, followed after."

—*Francis Thompson, in "The Hound of Heaven."*

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



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John's Story

The Heart-strings of God.

There's a tense tugging at the heart of God. The heart-strings of God are tight, as tight as tight can be. For there's a tender heart that's easily tugged at one end, and an insistent tugging at the other. The tugging never ceases. The strings never slack. They give no signs of easing or getting loose.

It's the tug of man's sore need at the down-end, the man-end, of the strings. And it's the sore tug of grief over the way things are going on down here with men, at the other end, the up-end, the heart-end, of the strings. It's the tense pull-up of a love that grows stronger with the growth of man's misunderstanding.

But the heart-strings never snap. The heart itself breaks under the tension of love and grief, grieved and grieving love. But the strings only strengthen and tighten under the strain of use.

Those heart-strings are a bit of the heart they're tied to, an inner bit, aye the innermost bit, the inner heart of the heart. They are the bit pulled, and pulled more, and pulled harder, till the strings grew. Man was born in the warm heart of God. Was there ever such a womb! Was there ever such another borning, homing place!

It was man's going away that stretched the heart out till the strings grew. The tragedy of sin revealed the toughness and tenderness of love. For that heart never let go of the

man whom it borned. Man tried to pull away, poor thing. In his foolish misunderstanding and heady wilfulness he tried to cut loose. If he had known God better he would never have tried that. He'd never have *started* away; and he'd never have tried to *get* away.

For love never faileth. A heart—the real thing of a heart, that is, God's heart—never lets go. It breaks; but let go? not once: never yet. The breaking only loosens the red that glues fast with a tighter hold than ever. The fibre of the heart—God's heart—is made of too strong stuff to loosen or wear out or snap. Love never faileth. It can't; because it's love.

Now all this explains Jesus. It was man's pull on these heart-strings that brought Him down. The pull was so strong and steady. It grew tenser and more insistent. And straight down He came by the shortest way, the way of those same heart-strings. For the heart-strings of God are the shortest distance between two given points, the point of God's giving, going love, and the point of man's sore need, given a sharper-pointed end by its very soreness.

It is a sort of blind pull, this pull of man on the heart of God; a confused, unconscious, half-conscious, dust-blinded, slippery-road sort of pulling, but one whose tight grip never slacks. Man needs God, but does not know it. He knows he needs some thing. He feels that keenly. But he does not know that it's God whom he needs, with a very few rare exceptions. It doesn't seem to have entered his head that he'll never get out of his tight corner till God gets him out.

Down the street of life he goes, eyes blinded by the thick dust, ears deafened by the cries of the crowd, by the noise

of the street without, and the noise of passions and fevered ambitions within, heart a-wearied by the confusion of it all, groping, stumbling, jostled and jostling, hitting this way and that, with the fever high in his blood, and his feet aching and bleeding; sometimes the polish of culture on the surface; _some_times rags and dirt; but underneath the same thing.

Yet under all there's a vague but very real feeling of that unceasing pull upward upon His heart-strings. But though blind and vague and confused that tugging is never the less tense, but ever more, and then yet more.

Jesus was God answering the tug of man's need on His heart-strings. And so naturally there was an answering feel in man's heart. Man felt the answer a-coming. There was a great stir in the spirit-currents of earth when Jesus came. A thrill of expectancy ran through the world, Roman, Greek, Barbarian, far and wide, as Jesus drew near. The book-makers of that time all speak of it. It was the vibration of those same heart-strings connecting man and God.

The move at God's end was felt at man's. The coming down along the highway of the strings thrilled and stirred and awed the hearts into which those strings led, and where they were so tightly knotted. The earth-currents spread the news. Man heard; he felt; he knew: vaguely, blindly, wearily, yet very really he heard and felt and recognized that help, a Friend, some One, was nearing.

And then when Jesus walked among men how He did pull upon their hearts! So quietly He went about. So sympathetically He looked and listened. So warm was the human touch of His hand. So strong was the lift of His arm

to ease their load. So potent was the spell of His unfailing power to give relief. How He did pull! And how men did answer to that pull! Unresistingly, eagerly, as weary child in mother's arms at close of day, they came crowding to Him.

The Fourfold Message.

It is fascinating to find one book in this old Book of God given up wholly to telling of this, John's Gospel. Of course the whole of the Book is really given up to it, when one gets the whole simple view of it at one glance. But so many of us don't get that whole simple glance.

So to make it easier for us simple common folk, and to make sure of our getting it, there is one little book, hardly big enough to call a book, just a few pages devoted wholly to letting us see this one thing. You can see the whole of the sun in a single drop of water. You can see the whole of the Book of God in this one little book that John wrote.

John's Gospel is like the small tracing of the artist's pen on the lower corner of an etching, the *remarque*, put there as a signature, the artist's personal mark that the picture is genuine, the real thing. The whole consummate skill of the artist is revealed at a glance in the simple outline-tracing on the margin. The whole of the God-story in the larger picture of the whole Book is given in few simple clear lines in this exquisite little thing commonly called John's Gospel.

It is striking to make the discovery that John's little book has *a distinctive message as a book*. It is full of messages, of course. But I mean that there is a distinct story told by

the book as a whole, by the very way it is put together. It is told by the very sort of language used, the words chosen as the leading words of the book. It is told by the picture that clearly fills John's eye as he writes, and by the very spirit that floods the pages as a soft light, and that breaks out of them as the subtle fragrance of locust blossoms in the spring.

The fragrance of flowers cannot be analyzed: it must be smelled and felt. That's the only way you'll ever know it. The fine scholarly analyses of John are helpful. But there's the subtler something that cannot be diagramed or analyzed or synthesized. It eludes the razor-edged knife, and the keenly critical survey. It is recognized only by one's spirit, and then only when the spirit is warm, and in tune with John's.

Of course each of the Gospel stories has a message of its own, quite apart from the group of facts common to them all. And these four messages together give us the fuller distinctive message of these four little books. And a very winsome message it is, too, that takes hold of one's heart, and takes a warm strong hold at that.

Matthew tells us that Jesus is a *King*. For a great purpose He chose to live as a peasant, as one of the common folks. But He was of the blood royal. He has the long unbroken kingly lineage. He showed kingly power in His actions, kingly wisdom in His teachings, and the fine kingly spirit in His gracious kindness of touch. He was gladly accepted and served as King by those who understood Him best. He was acknowledged as King by the Roman Governor; and He died as a King, and as a King was laid in a newly hewn tomb.

Mark adds a fine touch to this picture, a warm touch with colour in it,—this King of ours is *a serving King*. This comes not only with a warm feel, but it comes as a distinct surprise. Men's kings are *served* kings. There have been kings, and are, who rendered their people a fine high service, and do. But the overpowering impression given the common crowd watching on the street is that kings are superior beings, to be waited upon, humbly bowed to, and implicitly obeyed. They are to be served.

But *Mark's* picture shows us a King whose passion is to serve. The service which He draws out of His followers is drawn out by His warm serving spirit towards us. The words on the royal coat-of-arms are, "Not to be ministered unto, but to minister." And in the first meaning of the words He Himself used that means "not to be *served* but to *serve*." In *Mark* the air is tense with rapid action. The quick executive movement of a capable servant is felt in the terse words short sentences and swift action of the story.

There's yet warmer colouring in *Luke's* picture. This serving King is *nearest of kin to us!* He is not only of the blood royal, but of the blood human. He is bone of our bone, blood of our blood, and life of our common life. He came to us through a rare union of God's power with human consent and human function, never known before nor repeated since. This is the bit that *Luke* adds to the composite message of these four little God-story books.

Here Jesus has a tenderness of human sympathy with us men, for He and we are brothers. There's an outlook as broad as the race. No national boundaries limit its reach. No sectional prejudices warp or shut Him off from sympathetic

touch with any. He shares our common life. He knows our human temptations, and knows them with a reality that is painful, and with an intensity that wets His brow and shuts His jaw hard.

This king who serves is *a man*. He *can* be a king of men for He is a *man*. He has the first qualification. I might use an old-fashioned word in the first old-time meaning,—He is a *fellow*, one who shares the bed and bread of our common experience. And so He is *kin to us*, both in lineage and in experience, in blood and in spirit.

And John's share in this partnership message adds a simple bold touch of colouring that makes the picture a masterpiece, *the* masterpiece. This King who serves, and is nearest of kin to us, is also *nearest of kin to God*. He is not only of the blood royal, and the blood human, but of the blood divine. He was with God before calendars came into use. He was the God of that creative Genesis week. He came on an errand down to the earth, and when the errand was done, and well done, He went back home, bearing on His person the marks of His fidelity to the Father's errand. This is John's bit of rich high colouring.

And so *we are nearest of kin to God* through Jesus. Kinship is always a matter of blood. There is a double kinship, through the blood of inheritance, and the blood of sacrifice. Our *inherited* kinship of blood has been lost. But His blood of sacrifice has made a new kinship. We had broken the entail of our inheritance clean beyond mending. We were *outcasts* by our own act. But He *cast in*. His lot with us, and so drew us back and up and in. He made a new entail through His blood. And that new entail is as

unbreakable as the old broken one is unmendable. And so we come into the family of a King. And we are kingliest in character when we are Christliest in spirit and action. We are most like the King when we are helping others.

Our true motto, in our relation to our fellows, is: "I am among you as he that serveth." Towel and basin, bended knee and comforted pilgrim-feet and refreshed spirit,—this is our family crest. We're kin to all the race through Jesus. Black skin and white, yellow and brown; round heads and long, slanting eyes and oval, in slum alley and palatial home, below the equator and above it,—all are our kinsmen.

We are reaching highest when we are stooping lowest to help some one up. We're nearest like God in character when we're getting nearest in touch to those needing help. We are kingliest and Godliest and Christliest when we're controlled by men's needs, but always under the higher control of the Holy Spirit.

This is the composite message of the four Gospels; and this is its practical human outworking.

God on a Wooing Errand.

But it's the other John message we are especially after just now. There's another message of John's book quite distinct from this, though naturally allied with it. And this other is the crowding message of his book. Its thought crowds in upon you till every other is crowded into second place. And as it gets hold of you it crowds your mind and heart and life till every other is either crowded out, or

crowded to a lower place; *out*, if it jars; *lower place*, if it agrees, for every agreeing bit yields to the lead of this tremendous message.

But one must get hold of John before John's message gets hold of him. John was swayed by a passion. It was a fiery passion flaming through all his life. It burned through him as the fierce forest fire burns through the underbrush. Every base thing was eaten up by its flame. Every less worthy thing came under its heat. It melted and mellowed and moulded his whole being.

It was *the Jesus-passion*. It was kindled that memorable afternoon early in his life down in the Jordan bottoms.[1] John's namesake, the Herald, applied the kindling match. From then on the flames never flickered nor burned low. They increased steadily, and they increased in purity, until his whole life was under their holy heat.

John didn't always understand his Master. Sometimes he misunderstood. But he never failed in his trust of Him, nor in his fidelity to Him. Of the chosen inner circle John was the one who remained true through the sorest test, that betrayal-night test. Judas betrayed; Peter denied; the nine fled in terror down the road to save their cowardly lives; John went in "*with* Jesus." That fiery nature of his, that early won for him the stormy name "son of thunder," came completely under the sway of this holier tenderer stronger flame, and burned itself out in a passion of love for Jesus.

The Jesus-passion swayed John completely. This explains the man, and his career. It explains this little book of his ripe old age. And only this can. One must read the book through

John's own heart, then he begins to understand it. This Jesus-passioned man is the key to the book, the human key.

And the distinctive message of the book is simply this: *Jesus was God on a wooing errand to the earth.* That simple sentence covers fully all that is found in John's twenty-one chapters. Every line in these fourteen or fifteen pages can be traced back into that brief statement.

Indeed this becomes an outline of the book. See: in the opening paragraphs the wooing Lover is coming down to earth.[2] In the first twelve chapters the Lover is pleading winsomely and earnestly for acceptance.[3] Then He is seen in closest touch with the inner group of those who have accepted, opening His heart yet more, wooing still closer.[4] Then comes the last tragic pleading, pleading in intensest action, with those who persist in rejecting.[5] And then the last close heart-touches with the inner circle.[6]

The Water-Mark of John's Gospel.

The very words John so thoughtfully chooses as his leading words bear the distinct impress of this, like the sharply indented stamp of the mint on the new coin. Two such words stand out above all others, "believe" and "witness." The first actually occurs oftenest, sounding out like the dominant chord of music running throughout a symphony. The second is like the chief warp-thread into which the fabric is being woven.

The two words are really twins, born at the same time, of the same mother. They grow up together and work in

perfect accord. The witnessing is that men may understand and believe. It's the servant leading up to the belief that shall become the mastering thing. The belief is servant, too, in turn, leading up to the witnessing that becomes the mastering passion in those who believe.

These words are worth digging into for the fine gold that lies hidden within waiting the miner's pick. The word "believe" is a nugget of pure gold, whether you take our English word or John's word lying underneath. The underneath word, that John uses in his own mother tongue, runs a sliding scale of meaning.

It's a ladder rising from bottom round to topmost. It means to be persuaded that a thing is true; then to place confidence in it, to trust. And *trust* always contains the idea of *risk*. The heart-meaning always is that you *risk* something very precious to you, risk it to the point of heart-breaking disaster if your trust proves wrong.

Our English word is of very close kin. It runs the same sort of sliding scale, from something valuable and precious in itself, on to something that *satisfies you* regarding the matter in hand. You are not only satisfied but pleased, content. And so there is the same trusting and risking, the same leaning your whole weight upon the thing. Deep down at its root, *believe* is a close kinsman to *love*. They both spring out of the same warm creative womb.

When we dig a bit into that word *believe* in the usage of common life it means three distinct things, each leading straight into the other,—knowledge, belief, trust. That is, *facts*, *facts accepted*, *facts trusted* in regard to something that takes hold of your life. You hear something. You believe

it's true. But there must be the third thing, risking something valuable. There's no belief in the heart-meaning without this thing of *risking*. The trust that risks is the life blood of faith. The rest is only the bony skeleton with tendons and sinews and flesh. There's no life without the blood. There's no belief without trust.

And the word *witness* is the same pure-gold sort of nugget, assaying full weight. John's native word and our own are just the same in meaning. Their meaning is *to tell what you know*. We shall be running across this word again, and digging a bit deeper into it. But this is the thing that stands out in it. You tell something that you yourself know. There's personal knowledge. There's a telling some one else this thing you know. And yet more, there's the purpose in the telling, that others may know what you know, and get all the good that comes with knowing it.

The *witnessing* is that others may *believe*. It is a striking thing in John that the *thought* of witness is more common than the *word*. The word occurs several times, and always in a leading way. But the thought of witnessing is the colouring of every page, and the chief colouring.

I said that these two words were twins, born at the same time, of the same mother. That warm-hearted brooding mother is the word *wooing*. Originally *wooing* means bending towards, inclining forward or reaching out towards another. And the purpose of the reaching out is to get the other to reach forward towards you. And that purpose puts the warm feel into the reaching out.

All words were pictures first. Here in this word *wooing* is a picture, by one of the old masters, waiting to be restored,

with all the dusty accumulations of the years carefully removed. And here's the picture: a man standing, with the light of the morning shining in His eyes, body bending forward, hands reaching out, with an eagerness, an expectancy in every line of His body, and tender love glowing out of His face, and sounding in the very tones with which the voice is calling.

This picture is really the water-mark on the paper of John's Gospel. Hold up the paper of John's Gospel to the light. The best light for the purpose is found on Mount Calvary. High altitudes have clearer light. You see more distinctly. Now look. Hold still that you may see all the outlines more distinctly. There's the form of a Man standing in pleading attitude, with outstretched hands. His face combines all the fineness of the finest woman's face, with all the strength of the strongest man's, and more, immensely more, all the purity and tenderness and power of *God's* face. It *is* God Himself in human form coming a-wooing to earth, and we call His name Jesus. This conception is the very atmosphere of John's Gospel.

Jesus is the witness of the Father to men. He knew the Father. He knew Him by closest intimacy. He lived with Him. He came down to *tell* what He knew. He wanted others to know too. He wanted them to know *even as* He knew. *Telling* is the whole of Jesus; telling men of the Father.

His mere presence, His character, His warm sympathy, His practical helpfulness, His words, His actions, most of all

His dying and His rising, all these were a *telling*, a witnessing, a wooing; telling the Father's love, telling the damnableness of our sin by giving His very life blood to get it out of us; so telling us how we might really know the mother-heart of the Father.

Jesus the Dividing Line.

There are several contrasts between the first three Gospels and John's. It is very striking to notice one in particular in this connection. One reading the first three Gospels for the first time is impressed with the fact of Jesus' *rejection*. This stands out peculiarly and dominantly. It was the great fact, told most terribly in the death of Jesus. It was the thing that stood out sharpest in the generation to which Jesus belonged, the generation for whom these three Gospels were written at the first.

But John wrote his story for an after-generation, a generation that had not known the man Jesus by personal touch and observation. And so it was for all after-generations. And John makes it very clear that Jesus was rejected, *and* accepted.

He was indeed *rejected*; that fact stands out as painfully here as in the others. He was rejected by the little inner clique that held the national reins, and held them with fevered tenacity, and drove hard. And the reason for it is made to stand out as plainly as the fact. The envy and jealousy, the intense bitterness and viciousness and devilish

obstinacy back of the rejection stand as boldly out to all eyes as to Pilate's.

But the other side stands out sharply too. Jesus was *accepted*. He was accepted by all classes, by the cultured, and the scholarly, by thoughtful studious leaders and officials of the nation. He was accepted by the great middle classes and by those in lowest scale socially, and by the moral outcasts. Intense Hebrews, Roman officials of high rank, half-breed Samaritans, and men of outside nations group themselves together by their full acceptance of Jesus.

He was listened to, doubted, questioned, discussed, thought over, *and then accepted*. And He was accepted with a faith and with a love that counted not suffering nor sacrifice for the sake of Him whom they believed and trusted and loved. John makes this clear, rejected *and* accepted.

Jesus divided the crowds. Down the road He comes, with quiet strength, witnessing to the great simple truth of the Father's pure strong wooing love. And the crowd looks and listens and—*divides*. Some reject; clearly they are a minority, but entrenched in a position of power that proves quite sufficient for their purpose. Though it took all the power at their command to carry out their purpose.

Others accept. These are the crowds, the majority. Some don't understand. Their motives are selfish or mixed, like some other folks' motives. Some are played upon by the cunning of the leaders and swung away. But there remain the thoughtful ones whose faith goes from weakness to strength; it grows from more to yet more. It mellows from a true simple faith to a deepened, seasoned, sorely-tested,

surely-toughened faith that loves, loves clear down to the roots, and endures gladly. This is the simple warp-thread into which John's very simple story of Jesus is woven.

Spelling God.

I want to give you a bunch of keys, as we start into these homely talks in John's Gospel. They are simple keys. Any one can use them. They fit easily and smoothly into every lock, the lock of your life, the lock of any circumstance, any sore problem that may come up to baffle all your efforts. They bring treasures within easy reach. They open up the way into all you need. There is a key to God, a key to the Book of God, and then there are three keys to this little John book.

The key to God is in one little word. It has two spellings, sometimes with four letters, sometimes with five, and both correct spellings. The four-lettered spelling is for all the world. The five-lettered spelling is chiefly used in the western half of the earth, and along certain lines and in certain spots here and there in the eastern half where the word is known.

That first spelling is l-o-v-e. God is love. Love is of God. God is always controlled by a purpose in all His dealings with the race, and with you and me. There is no chance-happening with Him, no caprice, no shadow in His path that tells of His being swerved aside, by anything we do, from a steady purpose.

And that controlling purpose is *always a purpose of love*. It's a purpose of strong steady pure clinging brooding love. The bother is we don't know what that word *love* means; none of us. We know words but not the real things they stand for. We don't know the real thing of love because we don't know the real thing of God. If we knew, oh! if we but knew it—Him—how that simple statement would melt us down, and mellow us through, and mould us all over anew!

That's the shorter spelling. It is the universal spelling. That love is being spelled out to all the race by every twinkling star in the upper blue, every shade of green in the lower brown, by every cooling shading night, and every fragrantly dewy morning. Every breath of air and bite of food and draught of water is repeating God's spelling lesson. These are the pages in God's primer. So we all may learn to spell out God. And so we get the right spelling of our own lives.

Then there's the other spelling, the five-lettered, J-e-s-u-s. It's the same thing, only spelled differently; spelled in a yet better way. The spelling grows bigger to us when Jesus comes. When we know Him it takes more to spell out and to tell out God's love. God grows larger to our eyes as He comes walking among us as Jesus. No, He doesn't grow larger. We simply begin to find out how large He is.

This is the closer, more human spelling. The letters are nearer and seem bigger as they come walking down the street where we live, and knock at our own door. They're easier spelled out. We can get hold of them better. Love is a thing, we *think*. Jesus is *a person*. It's so different to touch a person. But when we know, we know that both spellings tell

the same thing. So far, only about a third of us have heard anything about this second, this closer spelling. Two out of three haven't heard about it yet. But those who really know this spelling are eager for the others to get it, too.

God is always controlled by a great simple purpose in thinking of you and me. And it is an unfailing purpose of strong tender love. This is the first key. Any one may take it and use it. It is unfailing. It will fit every lock. It unlock every problem. It will open up the riches to any life. They're brought within easy reach of any hand by the steady use of this key.

This is the key to God. It unlocks the doors and lets Him freely into our lives. Then we find out how much truer it is than we can understand.

Then there's *the key to the Book of God*. There are many keys here, of course. Daily time alone with the Book, thoughtful reading, prayer, some simple plan, putting into your life what has been put in its pages,—these are all good keys. But there's a master-key, *the* master-key. It is simply this: glad surrender of will to the God of the Book. I mean a strong intelligent yielding to His mastery in all of one's plans and life. The highest act of the strongest will is yielding to a higher will when you find it. And you find the higher, the highest, will here.

This is the master-key. Bending the will affects eyes and ears and mind. The hinges of eye and ear are in the will. As the will bends those hinges move of themselves. Eye and ear and mind open. The lower the will bends, the more fully and habitually, the more will eyes and ears open, the keener and more alert will be the mental processes, the more