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**Jesus****Washing His disciples' feet.**

BY

**BENJAMIN WILLS NEWTON.**

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## Jesus washing His disciples' feet.

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“He that is washed, needeth not to wash save his feet.”  
(John xiii. 10.)

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WE have already seen\* how various are the aspects in which the guilt of sin, as well as the one only means of its removal by *expiatory blood*, are presented in the types of the Old Testament. On the night of Egypt's visitation, Israel found themselves in the midst of Egypt—they too laden with guilt (see Ezek. xx. 7, 8.)—they too deserving to be smitten. But for *them*, grace—unmerited grace, provided protection in the blood of the Paschal Lamb. They heard of that one way of deliverance, and they despised it not. The blood was found marked upon their door posts, and the destroying angel passed on and entered not. The first apprehension that an awakened soul has of its danger, is in seeing that it is part of a condemned world, involved in its evil, and rightfully the heir of its judgment—*itself* unclean and dwelling in the midst of them that are unclean. The first appre-

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\* See Occasional Papers, No. II. page 1.—Sanctification by the Blood of Jesus.



hension it has of its deliverance, is when it discerns the efficacy of the blood of the true Paschal Lamb, and learns that all who truly cast themselves on *that* as their one refuge, dwell as in a sprinkled habitation, and are safe from the visitation that awaits an Egyptian, unsprinkled world.

But Israel when led into the wilderness and brought, in the Tabernacle of God, into conversance with holy things, found in the manner in which they served in that Tabernacle and moved in the midst of those holy things, a new and unexpected lesson respecting sin. They found that in leaving Egypt they had not left sin behind them. It was within them, and they brought it with them, even into the sanctuary of God. It became developed even in His near presence: iniquity was found to lurk even in their holiest things: and unless protection had again been provided for them through expiatory blood, their very privilege of approach to God would have entailed upon them ruin. But expiatory blood having been offered and sprinkled on the mercy seat, and on all the holy vessels that their touch defiled, their sin was forgiven, and the iniquity of their holy things not imputed. In the xvi. of Leviticus, therefore, in which all this is detailed, we find another aspect of our guilt, and another type of our deliverance. But we have yet other lessons. An Israelite might quit the Tabernacle *cleansed*. He might, as a clean person, go forth into the midst of human life around him. But the first moment that he came in contact with a bone, or a

dead body, or a grave, or even accidentally breathed air that death had tainted, (and how could this be avoided in a sphere in which death reigned?) he became instantly unclean. Having in him a tendency to defilement, and an affinity with uncleanness, he never could come into the presence of corruption without becoming tainted and unclean. And on all uncleanness, great or little, that holy Law which saith, "he that offendeth in one point is guilty of all," pronounced its curse. He that became unclean by accidentally touching a bone, or breathing the air of death was to be "cut off," unless the uncleanness could be removed; and it could only be removed by the sprinkled ashes of the appointed sacrifice. See Numbers xix. Thus there was ever recurring danger, and ever recurring sprinkling. "The law made nothing perfect." It never enabled the worshipper to say that he was free from guilt and from danger. On the contrary, he was ever and again involved and re-involved in guilt, and exposed to the infliction of wrath.

"But there is now the bringing in of a better hope whereby we draw nigh unto God."\* In the case of believers the guilt of *all* sin, whether the imputed guilt of the sin of their first parent, or the guilt that springs from the presence and working of indwelling corruption, or the guilt of committed sin both before and after conversion, is

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\* Επεισαγωγή δε κρείττονος ελπίδος, δι' ἧς ἐγγιζομεν τῷ Θεῷ. Heb. vii., 19.

alike purged by the *once-offered* blood of Jesus. The Law no more interposes its claim so as to bar our access to God. The debt of obedience that we owed has been discharged by the perfect obedience of our Substitute to God's holy Law, and the debt of suffering that we owed, because of our breaches of that Law, has been discharged by the submission of our Substitute to the appointed suffering. Complete satisfaction to every claim of God's governmental holiness has been made by our great Surety on behalf of all His believing people, so that *wrath* can no more awake against them. It is for ever stilled. There needs no further offering for sin (Heb. x. 18.)—no further sprinkling. As regards the judicial Courts of God we are "uncharged" (*ανεγκλητοι*): as regards the Courts of His worship we are "purged" (*κεκαθαρμενοι*): "sprinkled" (*εβραντισμενοι*): "washed" (*λελουμενοι*): "sanctified" (*ηγιασμενοι*). "Already," (*ηδη*) said our Lord, "ye are clean through the word which I have spoken unto you;" (John xv. 3.) for that word had guided to Himself—their Sin-bearer. And again, in the passage before us, "he that is washed needeth not save to wash his feet, but is clean every whit."

Nothing can be more unequivocal than this statement of our blessed Lord. It teaches, what His Apostles afterwards more fully explained, that faith in Him brings into the possession of a cleanness that is never lost again. There cannot be, as under the Law, a falling back into a condition

in which a cleansed person is regarded as having lost his cleanness, and become again exposed to wrath and condemnation. He is so "every whit clean," said our blessed Lord, "that he needeth not to wash again, *save his feet.*" In other words, though it be true that no believer escapes defilement as he treads from day to day the path of life, yet such defilement takes not away that cleansed condition which grace has made lastingly and for ever his. His defilements are not regarded as defilements that throw back a clean person into his former condition of total uncleanness, but as defilements that have come upon a person, who as to the totality of his condition, continues clean. Nothing could more fitly represent such a condition than the emblem chosen by our Lord—a washed person, with a foot needing to be washed.

The Law recognised no intermediate place between a condition of absolute, total uncleanness, and absolute, total cleanness. If one taint came upon a clean person he thereby lost his cleanness, and became exposed to wrath. The emblem, therefore, of a clean person with a foot needing to be washed, could have no place under the Law. The Law knew of no condition capable of being represented by such a symbol. Yet with what condition is the conscience of a believer, under the Gospel, more familiar? He knows that he is no longer regarded by God as an unpardoned rebel, but as a reconciled child. He knows that he shall never come into judgment. "He that hear-

eth my word, and believeth on him that sent me, hath everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation; but is passed from death unto life." (John v. 24.) He knows, that, as regards acceptance, he is "perfected for ever" by the one sacrifice, and that he will never be permitted to fall back again either under condemnation, or under the practical *dominance* of sin. (Rom. vi. 14.) He knows that he has a great High Priest who meets the accusations of Satan, and maintains the governmental holiness of God, and maketh all such intercession as is needful to uphold and preserve believers in that grace wherein they have been made to stand: interceding for them not as unreconciled and unsprinkled, but as reconciled and cleansed for ever under the abiding efficacy of the offering once made on Calvary. Yet whilst apprehending all this, we know that we are not what our Master was personally—*spotless*. On the contrary, we know that every day brings more or less of short-coming, transgression, and sin. "There is no man that sinneth not." (1 Kings viii. 46.) "In many things we all offend." (James iii. 2.) And although our cry is not to be towards God as a God unreconciled and standing towards us in a relation of wrath, yet we thankfully turn towards Him as a Father, merciful and gracious, and make confession unto Him and say, "forgive us our trespasses." Pardon granted by a Sovereign to a rebel or a criminal is one thing—forgiveness extended by a parent to-

wards his child is another. The latter is the forgiveness which the Lord has taught us to seek of our Heavenly Father. In seeking it we recognise indeed the existence of stain, but not of stain imputed unto condemnation and wrath. The foot needeth to be washed; but the totality of the cleanness is not lost. We ask as persons whom grace has delivered from the place of criminals, and brought into a relation of everlasting favour and love. Yet even by those who hold such a relation, forgiveness is needed every day; and by all who obey the commandment of their Lord, forgiveness is continually sought.

It is indeed strange that a truth so obvious—so perpetually attested by the experience of each passing day, should be, by any believer, denied. Even in human life, one friend may grieve another and ask for forgiveness, whilst fully conscious that the love of him whom he has offended is not withdrawn. A child who has grieved his parent asks for forgiveness without questioning the endurance of the parent's affection. Nor is there any thing of which the heart of an instructed believer is more deeply conscious than of the greatness and frequency of his short-comings, and failures towards Him who has, nevertheless, loved him with an everlasting love, from which nothing shall separate, and has abidingly delivered him from the power of darkness, and translated him into the kingdom of the Son of His love. Nor can anything be more plainly enforced in the Scrip-

ture, than the duty of confession to our Heavenly Father, and of saying to Him, as reconciled though erring children, "forgive us our trespasses as we forgive them that trespass against us." To say that a believer, because abidingly reconciled and pardoned, needs not, and ought not, to confess and ask for forgiveness of his daily trespasses, is contrary alike to every lesson that conscience and that Scripture teach. Nor must we extenuate the evil of such a doctrine on the ground that an opposite error is taught by many who affirm that believers are never brought into an *abiding* state of reconciliation here, and that wrath is not *lastingly* appeased. To deny the perpetuity and unchangeableness of the reconciliation provided for believers through the one finished sacrifice, is indeed to overthrow the foundations of our most holy faith. It is a blotting the tenth chapter of Hebrews out of the Bible. But error is not to be encountered by error, but by Truth. Although it be true that a believer, being reconciled, shall never find himself in the presence of unsatisfied justice, and amenable to wrath, yet it does not hence follow that he stands in no relation to *holy* love, and that such love, if he grieve it, has no claim on him for acknowledgment and confession. Such a doctrine could only be maintained, either by saying that a believer is absolutely sinless, or that a believer's sins are in nowise to be regarded as sins; for to say that they are to be recognised as sins, and yet that no acknowledgment is to be made,

and no forgiveness sought for them, is a statement so monstrous as to carry with it its own refutation.

If the reconciliation into which faith brings, had not been everlasting, our Lord never would have said, "he that is washed needeth not to wash:" on the other hand, if stains and defilements were not to be regarded as stains and defilements—if short-comings and trespasses were not to be recognised as short-comings and trespasses, He would not have added the words, "*save his feet.*" "He that is washed, needeth not to wash, save his feet, but is clean every whit." The Lord would neither have added these words, nor would He have girded Himself with the towel, and bowed down and washed His disciples' feet. That this was a symbolic action, and not merely a lesson to teach humility, is evident from His words to Peter, "Except I wash thee thou hast no part with me."

The trespasses then of a believer, whether sins of commission or omission—whether committed in ignorance or consciously, are likened by our Lord to the stains attaching to the feet of one who, after having completed his day of toil or travel, finds, as might be expected, his foot to be more or less defiled. And will any believer say that this is an untrue picture of his condition? What servant of Christ, however watchful, can affirm that he has ever for one single day trod the miry path of life and received on his foot no defilement? One only could say so—He whose feet morally were always like, "fine brass burning



as with fire in the furnace,"—feet incapable of defilement. At the close of His earthly pilgrimage, His feet instead of being washed like the feet of His disciples, were anointed—anointed with most precious ointment, like unto that poured upon the head of Kings and Priests—for His feet were worthy. They were the pure and undefiled feet of the true Priest and King—the Holy One. But it is not so with His people. "In many things we all offend." Every day leaves some trace of defilement on our feet, observed (though we in ignorance or carelessness may overlook it) by Him whose "eyes are as a flame of fire." Such defilements (seeing that we are not under the Law but under grace) do not deprive us of the standing that grace has given us in Him; they do not cast us back into our natural condition as heirs of wrath. Nevertheless, the transgressions of believers must be transgressions in His sight. He cannot call evil good, nor sanction any of the conventional standards by which men may choose to estimate evil. Our ways may become so displeasing in His sight as to receive His rebuke, and frown, and chastisement: and though it be the frown, and rebuke, and chastisement, not of wrath but of love, yet the conscience, unless hardened, must recognise the stroke, and be until it be removed, unhappy. There must have been a heavy burden resting upon the hearts of those of whom the Apostle said, "for this cause many are weak and sickly among you, and many sleep.

For if we would judge ourselves, we should not be judged. But when we are judged, we are chastened of the Lord, that we should not be condemned with the world."

We may be sure that our great Adversary, who knows all these things, and is quick to descry every stain, will, as "the Accuser of the brethren," do all that in him lies, to magnify such stains, and to promote and aggravate all possible results of sorrow. On the other hand, we have provided by God a great High Priest, who, whilst sustaining as God's Priest, God's governmental holiness, is able also to intercede with the love of a brother for His brethren; and pleading the efficacy of the same finished sacrifice that has made them "every whit clean," to ask that the new stains which their feet have contracted, should also be regarded as washed away; that so there might be the *manifestation* of love toward us, and not the expression of anger, or displeasure.

That such is the condition of every believer when the day of his earthly pilgrimage closes, and his spirit departs to be with Christ—that his feet will then be regarded as washed from every stain—will be doubted by none who understand the manner in which grace has triumphed over sin and all its consequences. Nor will any cloud dim the brightness of that hour, when the Church as a whole, shall be presented "a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing." It will be the hour of the full, absolute perfectness of the

family of faith ; when there shall be none amongst them that need confession, or rebuke, or chastening any more. When they enter their Father's presence, each foot will have been perfectly washed. Not one spot will be there. They will find the forgiveness extended to them from their Heavenly Father in respect of their transgressions as children, to be as perfect and complete as the pardon which reached them when they were first reconciled and delivered from the consequences of their rebellion against His government as their Lawgiver and King. They will be met not with reproof, but greeted with the full unhindered manifestation of complacent love. But to what will they be indebted for this mercy? Will it not be to the intercession of Him who is their Master—their Brother—their Priest? The scope of His intercession comprehends *every* need of His people. He manifests the depth of His grace and love towards His brethren by asking that these stains should be forgiven ; and at the same time, by asking *in the character of Priest*, He sustains and glorifies the governmental holiness of God. And His intercession is heard ; for He is heard always, and forgiveness is accorded, and the stain is gone. The feet are cleansed ; and it was as a pledge of fulfilling this final act of love towards *all* His people (final I mean as regards their washing) that He marked the close of the day of His disciples' service with Him in the earth, by bending down and washing their feet.

But whilst the believer has a full right to triumph

in the thought that the faithful love of His heavenly Master will, at last, wash his foot of every stain, so as for the greeting of unhindered love to meet him when he enters his Father's presence, without any token of grief, or of displeasure, yet are his desires to be restricted to this? Are they to be limited to *the future only*? Will he not also seek that his feet might be *daily* washed—that he might daily be as one practically approved, walking as a dear child in well pleasing? This can only be by our feet being ever and again washed by our gracious Lord, for there is no absolute perfectness here.

But there may be among believers great carelessness, presumption, unchecked worldliness, and disregard of God's Truth. There may be a refusal to add to our "faith virtue, and to virtue knowledge" and the like. There may be an attempt to connect with the one true foundation, principles and practices that are worthless like "wood, grass and stubble," and not precious like "gold, silver, and precious stones." In that case, the Holy Spirit, whereby God hath in faithful grace *sealed* us unto the day of redemption, must be grieved. Many and deep stains will be found on our feet. Our heavenly Master and Advocate may, and does intercede for us as against the malice of our great Adversary, and we are upheld and preserved from irremediably falling: and besides this, undeserved, and by us unsought-for forgiveness may many times meet us in our wanderings, and many things

may be done by His providence and grace, to arouse and warn us. Yet we may turn a deaf ear to all these things, as the Churches did before their candlesticks were removed. And so our great Intercessor may see it meet to cease to ask for *present* forgiveness. The stains may be allowed to continue and to increase; and disastrous results may follow, and heavy chastisement come. We read of one, that he was "to be delivered to Satan for the destruction of the flesh that the spirit might be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus." His feet, no doubt, had often been washed. Often forgiveness had been extended to him; but he had despised the mercy. He had slightly esteemed the washing, and sought not to avail himself of the guidance of the hand that washed. Therefore, for a season, his feet were allowed to remain unwashed. Stain accumulated upon stain, until at last his transgression became grievous, and he was found treading a path that would have ended in ruin, if there had not been One watching over him mighty to save—able to pluck even as from the fire. He was recovered, and his feet were washed at last; but after what dishonour, sin, and sorrow—after many too had been contaminated by his evil.

On the other hand, there may be those who prove their ways, and seek in the exercise of self-judgment, to please and to walk humbly with their God. Such well know how continually they need that their feet should be washed. They will desire it as a daily mercy, and will endeavour to look

daily to the Lord for it. Whilst desiring to judge themselves, and to confess daily, and to ask forgiveness of their Heavenly Father, not as unreconciled rebels, but as children loved with an everlasting love, yet they will not depend on the completeness of their own confessions, or on their own ability for discovering their failures, short-comings, and sins—desiring in this to rest rather on the perfectness of the knowledge of their great High Priest, and ever to look to Him that He might intercede for them according to *His* wisdom and *His* knowledge of their circumstances and wash their feet of every stain—whether stains that they know not, or stains that they know. Our knowledge here is at the best imperfect (for “we know only in part”) but, not only so, it is continually more imperfect than it need be, because of some film that has come over our inward sight, which the true eye-salve would remove. Sins of ignorance may abound. We cannot, therefore, trust the accuracy of our powers of discernment even as respects our own sin; and must consequently mistrust our own confessions. Even if less wanting in sincerity, they would be deficient in comprehensiveness. Accordingly, we gladly recognise that all that *perfect* confession and *perfect* intercession which is demanded in the Courts of Heaven as necessary to maintain the dignity and vindicate the principles of God’s holy government, comes from our risen and glorified Priest, and is made dependent on *His* perfectness and faithfulness. Accusations, difficulties, needs,

and dangers of which we may know little or nothing, His vigilance and priestly intercession meet. On Him, therefore, as to these things, faith relies; not seeking to take on itself a burden which it knows that it could not bear. Nevertheless, we desire grace to be made more conscious of the nature and extent of the services thus fulfilled for us by our Lord. We desire to be preserved from being altogether insensible to the need of confession with respect to things that may form the subject of His intercession for us; we desire to have some apprehension of the nature and extent of the stains from which His intercession cleanses the feet of His brethren. To grow in grace is to grow in the ability to feel about those things, whether good or evil, about which the Lord feels, and about which He offers intercession and prayer. Whilst on the other hand, to be altogether unmoved by the excellency of things in which He delights, and to be insensible to the evil of things which He abhors, indicates great and dangerous distance of heart from Him.

Earnestly, therefore, will every believer, if he be wise, desire that the Lord would be pleased, again and again, at the close of each day, to wash away the defilements that his feet may have contracted. Wherever there is habitual self-judgment and confession, this would, no doubt, be done. Our feet would be cleansed. But if we refuse to confess, if we say that we have no sin, or that our sins and short-comings are altogether

disregarded and overlooked by the Lord, so that we have no need to say, "forgive us our trespasses," what must then be expected, but that stain would accumulate upon stain, and hardness of heart and disobedience be found in result. We may be very sure that that which is not confessed as sin, will not be repented of, nor sought to be avoided as sin.

Yet whatever may be the degree of his watchfulness and self-judgment, how gladly and thankfully does the believer look forward to that hour when he knows that the last stain that has rested on his foot will be surely washed away by the faithfulness of the love of Him who hath said, that "whom He loveth, He loveth unto the end." Here is the great refuge of the weary soul—the foundation of the stability of its peace. Faith often recurs to these words: "having loved His own which were in the world, He loved them unto the end." We remember these words, and find in them the sure pledge that we too at the end of our earthly pilgrimage shall have our feet finally and fully washed, so as to be "presented in the presence of His glory with exceeding joy."

Nor must we forget the injunction with which He concluded this ministration of His love. "If I then, your Lord and Master, have washed your feet; ye also ought to wash one another's feet." In discovering any stain that may be resting on the feet of our brethren, we are not to blind ourselves to its presence, or to hide from ourselves its



character by calling evil good. If we are to be honest and truthful in respect of ourselves, we should be equally honest and truthful in respect of others. On the other hand, we have to beware of looking on the sins or failures of our brethren with pharisaic self-complacency, and cold indifference. What condition more awful than theirs' who find their joy in searching out iniquities, and exult in exposing and magnifying them when discovered. Such have indeed reason to remember that with whatsoever judgment they judge, they shall be judged; and that the measure that they mete to others shall be meted to themselves again. How continually, therefore, should we remind ourselves that the love of the same gracious Lord that is toward us is toward our brethren likewise, and that one of our chief privileges is the title to appeal to it and intercede on their behalf, asking that stains, even of the deepest dye, may be removed; and that the deserved results of chastisement and sorrow might be averted. So we should not be as those who "bite and devour one another," but be as those "who wash one another's feet." It is true, indeed, that our intercession is not like that of our Lord; for His intercession is perfect in holiness and in wisdom, and is in all things necessarily accordant with the Father's will. Yet our intercession, poor and imperfect as it is, is, nevertheless, not despised. It is presented not in our own names but in His name; and if we pray according to His will, He heareth us.

Nor must we forget that whilst the love and grace of Jesus our Lord is ready to wash away, and finally will wash away every stain from every foot of His brethren, there is also another relation in which He stands to His people as the Shepherd and Bishop of their souls. Accordingly, He seeks not only to wash away stains when contracted, but to guard also against their recurrence. There are certain paths which must, if trodden, bring on our feet stains of the deepest dye. From such paths He seeks to preserve His people, and from such paths they would be preserved, if they gave due heed to the directions of His Word, and the admonitions of His Spirit. It is true indeed that feet so susceptible of defilement as ours, will certainly in their daily way, notwithstanding all our watchfulness, contract some stain. But there are certain paths in which defilements abound, and by entering them, we, as it were, court pollution. Against such paths the Lord, as the Shepherd and Bishop of souls, guards. His Word, His Spirit, His ministers, are sent to warn His people against ways of folly and death—where, sowing to the flesh, we of the flesh reap corruption; and to show us other paths—paths of life and peace, and to declare unto us those promises (true and faithful, because given in the title of the name of Jesus) whereby we are strengthened to resist the world, and to bring forth fruit unto God. This is indeed a different relation of the Lord to His people from that in which we see Him washing clean their

feet: but it is one not less gracious, nor less needed. And if we are permitted to follow His example in the one case, we are not forbidden to imitate it in the other. If we can intercede for our brethren and ask forgiveness for their trespasses, we may also advise and warn and admonish them, and speak to them words of truth and soberness, and comfort them in their many weaknesses, and encourage them in the narrow way. Our efforts may be feeble and poor, yet they shall not be in vain in the Lord.

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