

Chapter 1

They Disputed

“I’m the greatest!”

“No, you are not; I’m the greatest!” “Prove it!”

“It asks no proof. The facts speak for themselves.”

“Yes, facts! Here’s a fact: I was the first one to join the Master!”

“Not alone, you weren’t. But you and your brother were the first ones He rebuked, Boanerges!

“And you are the one He made to catch a fish, to get you out of a hole you had dug for yourself.”

“Listen, you fellows! Who cares about fishes? This is a typical fishermen’s brawl.”

“Well, who are you to lord it over us? Where did you come from?”

“From the rabbi’s school, my amiable fishmonger. And glad enough the Master was to get me.”

“And so you are the greatest?”

“Great enough to laugh at your pretensions. Whom has the Master put in charge of the moneys? Not you. And not the publican.”

“The publican made the money, and the ex-scribe writes it down!”

“Made it, indeed! Since that initial feast, we’ve had little enough from you.”

“Brethren, this quarreling is offensive. I pray you, let it cease. Has not the Master said, ‘The meek shall inherit the earth?’”

“Ah, so! We have the meek with us! Pray give me title to a foot of your earth.”

“Listen, men! We are lagging behind the Master. He walks alone. Let us hasten and overtake Him, and ask Him who is the greatest.”

“So innocent! Have we not asked Him, and He put us off, talking about a child? But wait awhile, and you shall see and acknowledge who is the greatest.”

Whether or not so crudely and childishly, certainly with passion did the Twelve on this journey in Galilee discuss their respective merits and their prospective relations; for when, arrived at their destination in Capernaum, Jesus called them to Him and asked them, “What were ye reasoning in the way?” “they held their peace: for they had disputed one with another in the way, who was the greatest.” Mark 9:33, 34, R. V.

WHO IS THE GREATEST?

It was an ever-present question with them; for they were not without worldly ambition. In joining the Master, their motives were mixed. They loved Him, no doubt; they admired, nay, even worshiped Him. But they had not yet experienced conversion, or were converted only to a little degree. They believed that in being taken into Jesus' circle of friends and disciples they were placed in the way of coming wealth and fame and power. He the King, they His counselors - who so great as they? The only question remaining was, Which of them was the greatest?

Their poverty, their peasant origin, their uncouthness of manner and speech, were no rebuke to their expectations. They were convinced their Master was the Messiah, that He had all power. And He had chosen them, they were His particular friends; He must have perceived in them excellences which were not apparent to others, nay, which had not even been suspected by themselves. That was a fulcrum on which their present lowliness levered their future even higher. They were the King's council.

And they had tasted power. They - fisherman, publican, carpenter, husbandman, as well as scribe - they had gone forth under a great inspiration and had proved that they could preach and hold their audiences, that they could heal the sick, that they could sometimes cast out devils - little ones, and they might even dare sometime to do as they had been commanded and raise the dead. True, there were some who would not listen to them, and there were sick they could not heal, and there were devils they could not cast out. But wait, wait! They had only a year or two of experience as yet. Surely they would grow, they were growing. The only question was, Which of them would grow into greatest stature? Which of them would be the greatest?

They were not occupied with this question all the time, to be sure. They had their duties, and they sought to perform them. They were students in a school, they were workers in a cause. They listened to their Teacher, and they said, "Yea, Lord" - yet not always. For once one of them took Him aside, and said, "What You have just said about Your coming fate cannot be true, Master; we will not let it be." And more than once they had met the incomprehensible in His teaching with dogged incomprehension, and decided not to seek elucidation from Him, because they did not want to know. But they went along.

They kept their seasons of prayer with Jesus, at least until, weary, they fell asleep. They went willingly as His messengers, and received blessing in their ministry to the poor and needy. It was true (though

WHO IS THE GREATEST?

they would not acknowledge it) that they dreaded meeting the smooth, scornful scholarship of the Pharisees; they were better at meeting the stones of the Samaritans. But they had a calm, even supercilious confidence in the truth they held, and they knew their Master was more than a match for the lawyers. Meanwhile, they could show their contempt of the Pharisees by eating with unwashed hands and by beating out grain on the Sabbath day. All this was a part of their religion, and they were religious. But the final question uppermost in their minds was, Who was to be the greatest in the kingdom to come?

The subject and its debate had arisen among them many times. Early in their discussion, finding no agreement among themselves, they had ventured to bring the question to Jesus. And in doing it, they fancied themselves very scholastic. This was the fashion of the schools, whether of the Jews or of the Greeks. Why should they not take on the form of a school? They wanted to be considered, not as a rude, illiterate peasant mob, following a Miracle Worker around, handing out bread and fishes to hungry people; but as a learned, polished student body, dipping into the deep things of life, propounding puzzling questions to show off the profundity of their thought and the wisdom of their Teacher. In other schools he who could invent the most puzzling situations in a case history, requiring the greatest ingenuity of intellect to solve, was accounted the most promising disciple. They too would tie life into knots.

And their instinct was true to the world's life. In this question, "Who is the greatest?" they had a stock problem, one that lay and that lies at the foundation of all selfish accomplishment. And they were prepared to discuss it pro and con, or to take advantage of any decision. If the Master should say, "What constitutes greatness?" they could declare, discordantly, that it lay in strength, cunning, eloquence, diplomacy, birth, education, culture, devotion. If the Master should say, "I will set a quest for your proving," they were ready to enter into the contest against one another. If He should say, "Judas is the greatest," they would prove their sportsmanship by falling in behind him - and striving for the second highest place. In any case, it would be exciting; it might, through some scheme of contest, fill their treasury; it might - who knew? - result in the overthrow of Roman rule and Jewish hierarchy together. Ah, this was no childish question; it was profound thinking, inspired politics! It would get results!

"At the same time came the disciples unto Jesus, saying, Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" Matthew 18: 1. Then, as often,

WHO IS THE GREATEST?

Jesus surprised them. He surprised them because they had never quite grasped His philosophy of education. As a teacher, He did not fit into their pattern; He did not give the expected reactions. His school was not the sort of school they could find anywhere else; and so long as their model was the school of rabbi or philosopher, they could not understand the life and science and methods of Christ. Why, now, He should have said: "Considering this, and weighing that, and pondering the other thing, it would appear that in this situation, or that circumstance, or such another condition, either Peter, or James, or John might be called the greatest." But He did nothing of the sort.

"Jesus called a little child unto Him, and set him in the midst of them." Well, what for? Who cared about a baby just now? Where was the child's mother, anyway? Let the women attend to their work! When so great a question as this had been propounded, a question that might weigh the nations in the balance and decide the destiny of the kingdom, what did the Master mean by distracting their attention to a little child? Of course, of course! everybody recognizes that the home is important, that children must be trained, that a baby is appealing in our softer moments. But there is a fitness to things, and this is no time to intrude a child into our class.

But the Master was saying: "Except you become changed over, and become like little children, you shall not even enter into the kingdom of heaven, much less be the greatest in it." Well, well! This is one of His dark sayings. Of course He cannot mean that, in any sense whatever. As Nicodemus said, a man cannot enter the second time into his mother's womb, and be born. And neither, even in the figurative sense, would a man desire to be like a little child, helpless, dependent, trustful. A man must be self-reliant, duly suspicious, wary, calculating, enterprising, ambitious. A fruitless session of school this morning! Let us take up where we left off.

So here they were, lagging behind the Master in their journey, that they might have freedom to solve the question which He refused to settle. Mark 9:33-37. Just how open or how subtle they were in their arguments we have only our imaginations to determine; for there is no record of their conversation. It is not incredible that some of them were, as Judas Iscariot might have said, as rude as fishmongers in their squabbling; for they had been used to such billingsgate, and even at the end of their novitiate, when Peter was confronted with a frightening dilemma, he readily backslid into his old-time habit of cursing and swearing. On the other hand, their companionship with Jesus through

WHO IS THE GREATEST?

nearly three years of learning and training may have refined their manners and their methods to such a degree that each more subtly insinuated his qualifications for the highest place in the kingdom. No matter! they could not settle it. And the upshot was that two of the more enterprising hit upon a test: they would make a bold bid for the two highest positions, bolstering their request with an array of services rendered and of friendship won. James and John, taking their mother Salome into conference, came before Jesus privately. Mark 10:35-41; Matthew 20:20-24.

“Master,” they said, “we want you to do for us whatever we shall ask of you.” Like children trying to ensnare a parent into a blind promise!

“Yes, Master,” said their mother, “it is also my request.” And in that re-enforcing echo could be read her implication of Jesus’ obligation to reward services rendered: “You know, Master, what our family has done for You. My husband and I devoted our two sons to Your company and cause. We gave them up without a murmur, though it cramped our business plans and took our beloved children away. But more than that, Zebedee their father has continued to put money into the cause. And still more, I myself have left home and all the comforts and joys that wife and mother craves, to minister to You on your journeys. Has any other family done so much? Is it not right that we should have recognition and reward?”

“What is it you want Me to do for you?” Jesus asked.

“Command,” said she, “that these my two sons -

“Grant,” said they, “that we may sit, one on Thy right hand and one on Thy left hand, in Thy glory!” Ah! Premier and treasurer! Head of the council and handler of the funds! Arbiter of the King’s favor and keeper of His wealth! Any question then of who is the greatest?

But Jesus said: “You know not what you ask. Are you able to drink of the cup that I shall drink of, and to be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?”

Not the least idea had they of what He meant, nor of what His words involved in experience, in life, and in death; but, eager to leap every hurdle they saw in the way of acceptance, they answered confidently, “We are able!”

And looking down the years, Jesus saw their future experience, saw their bitter disappointment, their cleansed and renovated faith, their conversion, the early martyrdom of the one and the long, patient, faithful life service of the other. And He answered compassionately:

WHO IS THE GREATEST?

“Ye shall drink indeed of My cup, and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with: but to sit on My right hand, and on My left, is not Mine to give, but it shall be given to them for whom it is prepared of My Father.”

Disappointed and uncomprehending, they turned away. Perhaps they muttered their chagrin and disapproval in the ears of their fellow disciples; perhaps someone overheard. In any case, the Ten shortly knew of it. And the fires of jealousy and envy and rage rose higher within them.

“The impudence, the insolence, the smug egotism of those two!”

“The nerve of them, not merely to think themselves worthy, but to make formal request for the highest places in the kingdom!”

“Yes, indeed! How could they think themselves the greatest? Proud, passionate, hot-tempered, vindictive! whom the Master Himself called ‘the sons of thunder!’”

“Here, you two! Listen to us!”

The church in its beginning was rending itself with passion, jealousy, spite, backbiting, dissension, over the question, “Who is the greatest?” The gates of hell were about to prevail against it.