

Footwashing

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TAKING CHRIST'S LOVE TO THE WORLD

FOOT WASHING (JN.13:1-30)

Jesus took the common domestic practise of foot washing and used it to teach his disciples a lesson in humble service. Was there a deeper significance in the mind of John in retelling this pivotal event in the life of the Lord Jesus?

John's account of what happened at the Last Supper is different from the three synoptics. He begins his story after the Passover Meal, *"And supper being ended."* Jesus' action is described graphically as He *"laid aside his garments; and took a towel and girded himself"* and poured water from a basin and began to wash His disciples' feet. After he had dried them he put on his garment and sat down.

John often takes incidents from the life and ministry of Jesus and uses them to convey a deeper spiritual meaning. This incident of Jesus washing the disciples' feet has a much deeper significance than the event itself, even John's choice of words point to a deeper meaning than the obvious lesson of humble service. He interprets this purpose to them when he is finished his menial task, *"If I then, your Lord and Teacher have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, you are to do as I have done to you"* (vv14-15). In the following verse Jesus refers to slaves and masters. Jesus came as a slave to serve, not as a lord to be served.

In Eastern lands the washing of guest's feet was the task of slaves, usually the work of women or female slaves. A Hebrew male slave was not to wash feet, but a Gentile male was required to. Jewish and Gentile female slaves washed their master's feet. Jewish wives washed their husband's feet alongside their other duties in marriage. With the Eastern emphasis on hospitality there are several references to a host's responsibility to provide water for washing feet (Gen.18:3-5; 19:1; 24:32; 43:24; 1Sam.25:41; Lk.7:44). The story of Abigail's meeting with David shows female alacrity and wisdom as she offers herself to fulfil the role of a female servant to David's servants/slaves by washing their feet. Similarly, one cannot forget Jesus' sharp rebuke to Simon who had insulted him by not providing water to wash his feet in contrast to the woman who washed Jesus' feet with the water of her tears. Jewish wives were expected to wash the feet of their husbands. However, a loving husband may choose not to permit his wife to perform this service as in the case of *"Joseph and Asenath"* (20:1-4). Asenath who is the model wife and proselyte

insists on fulfilling the role of a maidservant towards her Lord (cf. 1Pet. 3:5-6), *“Because you are my Lord from now on, and I am your maidservant.” “Your feet are my feet ... and another woman will never wash them.”*

Foot washing could imply servility, the necessary and demanding duty to a superior or it could be done as a free act of respect; the washing of a teacher’s feet by a rabbinic student. John Baptist’s words to Jesus when he said he was not worthy to undo Jesus’ sandal straps showed his regard for Jesus. When Jesus washed his disciples’ feet this was an act that contradicted cultural norms and values and must have shaken them. Other words of Jesus fit well into this symbolic action of humility, Jesus said, *“The Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and give his life a ransom for many”* (Mk. 10:45). In Lk. 22:27 in the context of the Last Supper he says, *“I am among you as one who serves.”* As Jesus exhorted the disciples to follow his example so Paul says, *“By love serve one another”* (Gal. 5:13).

What is the deeper meaning of this act of Jesus which comes at a crucial point in the narrative of Jesus’ life? He had spoken several times about His hour, which had not yet come, but in response to a Gentile proselyte enquiry and a desire to see Him, He took this as a sign and said, *“The hour is come that the Son of Man should be glorified”* (Jn. 12:23). Jesus repeats this statement at the beginning of Ch. 13 where John records the fact that, *“Jesus knew that His hour was come that He should depart out of this world unto the Father”* (v1). This time of glorification was also the time of His sufferings, which came upon Him before He reached the Garden of Gethsemane; we hear the words of Jesus, *“Now is my soul troubled; and what shall I say? Father, save me from this hour; but for this cause came I to this hour. Father glorify you name. Then came there a voice from heaven, saying, I have both glorified it, and will glorify it again”* (vv27-28). These verses are John’s equivalent to the hypnotic’s Gethsemane accounts.

To begin to prise under the surface of this moving incident we need to examine the vocabulary John uses. Is there a deeper meaning than the obvious one of humble service? The language John uses has been carefully chosen. The word for “laying aside” His garment is *τιθημι* which is not the usual word for taking off a garment. It is the word used earlier for the Good Shepherd laying down His life for the sheep

(10:11, 15, 17, 18) and the word is used later for the willingness of Peter to lay down his life (13:37, 38). The verb that is used for the resuming of the clothing is λαμβανω is unusual in the sense John gives here. Again, it is found in the discourse on the Good Shepherd, where Jesus speaks of taking up His life again in the resurrection (10:17, 18). The “laying aside” and “taking up” of the outer garments of Jesus point symbolically to His death.

It is also possible to see that in Jesus’ girding of Himself with a towel should also to be understood symbolically. To gird oneself with an apron or towel was a sign of preparation for task such as serving tables (Lk.12:37; 17:8; 1Pet.5:5). A Jewish midrash on Gen.21: where Hagar was sent away from Abraham’s family says, *“Abraham dismissed her (Hagar) with a bill of divorcement and took a cloth and girded it about her loins, that people might know her to be a slave.”*¹ In Jn.21:18-19 Peter is to be girded by another which symbolizes his death by martyrdom. The use of these words points to the fact that Jesus saw in this sacred symbolic act a prophetic enactment that anticipated the cross that lay before Him. He humbles Himself in anticipation of His humiliation on the cross.

This Scripture does not stand alone. In Philippians 2:6-8 Jesus came in the form of a slave to serve and to die. Similarly in Mk.10:44-45 Jesus links closely together service and death, *“The Son of Man came to serve and to give His life a ransom for many.”* Such a link between service and suffering may be seen in the parallel anointing in the previous chapter (12:1-8). The two events, first the anointing of Jesus by Mary and in the next chapter the anointing of the disciples by Jesus is not coincidental. The anointing of Jesus may have prompted Him to do a similar action to the disciples. They were also going to face suffering as well as Him. Mary anointed the *feet* of Jesus in a moving act of loving service to her Master. Jesus explicitly interprets her action as anointing Him for His burial. Jesus went to the cross with the fragrance of Mary’s ointment on Him. Jesus interpreted her singular act as referring to His death, which is what we have done with regards to Jesus act of service in the next chapter. Surely, the reference to cleansing Jesus speaks about with regard to Peter points to the efficacy of Christ’s work of salvation which he

1 Beasley-Murray, Word Bible Commentary 36, John (Waco, Texas: Word, 1987)

accomplished in His death and points to Paul's words in speaking of *"the washing of regeneration, and the renewing of the Holy Spirit"* (Titus 3:5). John says that *"the blood of Jesus Christ cleanses us from all sin"* and promises that resulting from confession of our sin, Jesus Christ will *"cleanse us from all unrighteousness"* (1Jn.1:7, 9). The cross makes entire cleansing possible.

Several years ago I travelled across the mountains from Crimea to Ukraine with a friend called Vladimir Franchuk. It was in the depths of winter, so cold that the trolley buses had frozen up on the highway and had been abandoned. The road was like a skating rink. I remember at one dangerous moment I reached out for the door handle thinking that a crash was inevitable. We arrived home after a long stressful ride in Vladimir's Lada. I was staying with an elderly Russian lady who was stone deaf and spoke to me all the time in Russian, convinced that I understood every word she said. In the kitchen she had a large cooking pan full of water heating on the stove. She took my hand and led me to a chair and she then untied my shoe laces, took off my shoes and then my socks. Returning to the kitchen she brought the large pan full of hot water and placed my feet into the water and washed them with her hands. I felt deep emotion like the disciples of Jesus and I was humbled and melted in my heart. To have your feet washed is humbling and makes you feel vulnerable. This dear lady was serving me and humbling herself by washing my feet. I remember visiting with a dear sister in an apartment in Tallinn, Estonia when the country was part of the Soviet Union. She introduced me to her pastor whose first words to me were, *"Do you practise foot washing?"* Foot washing is not high up on our agenda, at that point of time it was not high on mine!

I can remember (how could one ever forget!) occasions of foot washing in the early days of our fellowship; men with men and women with women. All I can say is that for me they were holy occasions. Others perhaps would find the exposure embarrassing and dismiss them as too intimate. This has been one of the reactions to our former way of sharing together in the Breaking of Bread. What I do deplore is the quick way many churches pass the bread and wine from one to another. Any sense of *"Tarrying, one for another"* has been lost in formality.

Jesus said to His disciples after He had completed His task, *“For I have given you an example that you should do as I have done to you”* (v15).

