

How Beautiful are the Feet

As we draw close to this year's Passover, I would like, in this article, to home in on the subject of the Foot-Washing Ceremony.

First, some questions, which this article will answer from God's Word: Why did Jesus add the Foot-Washing ceremony into His Passover service? Why is it significant? What does it symbolize?

Ugly Feet I Have Known

Although God's Passover service is the most solemn evening of the whole sacred year, still it is true that God has a wonderful sense of humour, which even comes out in the wonderful scriptures He has inspired us to read on Passover night each year (e.g. John 16:16-19). So, in a light-hearted but sincerely respectful vein, in order to illustrate a point, may I say that you brethren reading this article – especially the men – should count yourselves blessed – specifically more blessed than the poor men of our Vancouver Island church group – blessed that you do not keep the Passover service and the Foot-Washing ceremony with us!

Why? Because my feet rank amongst the ugliest in the world! Well, at least in the church! Please allow me to take a minute to tell you about my poor feet; and to describe them to you with a short history.

Some years ago, a heavy wooden picnic table collapsed on my left ankle, injuring it and ultimately leaving a big scar. Nasty! A few years after that accident, I suffered another one. I fell down a deep ditch and severely injured my right ankle. That injury still bothers me to this day, thirteen years later. The bruising, varicose veins and discoloration resulting from that accident still vary from day to day. Nasty!

Shortly after that accident, I developed Psoriasis, a non-infectious skin disease which often attacks pre-injured areas of the body. At one time, many areas of my body were afflicted with Psoriasis. But now, it has subsided and merely affects my fingers and my ankles. Still nasty!

To add insult to injury, I later caught one of those common viruses which cause the misshaping of the toenails. Nasty!

Despite all of this, I still would not claim that my feet are the very ugliest I have ever seen. When my young family and I first moved from to Vancouver Island back in the spring of 1979, at my first Passover service with the Victoria congregation, I was teamed

up for the Foot-Washing ceremony with a wonderfully humble, quietly-spoken church member, the late C. J. McDonald, who won the prize for the ugliest feet I have ever seen up to that time, or since. As a result of some illness or injury unknown to me, Mr. McDonald's ankles resembled plump, ripe, dark purple eggplants. Very nasty!!

Beautiful Feet

Even considering the ugliness of my feet and those of the late Mr. McDonald, amazingly, the Creator of mankind proclaims that the feet of His brothers and sisters are to be considered "beautiful":

And how shall they preach unless they are sent? As it is written: "How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the gospel of peace, who bring glad tidings of good things!" (Romans 10:15)

Which scripture was the apostle Paul referring to here? Probably this one:

How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news, who proclaims peace, who brings glad tidings of good things, who proclaims salvation, who says to Zion, "Your God reigns!" (Isaiah 52:7)

A similar scripture appears in the book of Nahum. Both of these verses apply, of course, to the One who would later come to earth as the human Jesus Christ; but they can also apply to His spiritual brothers and sisters:

Behold, on the mountains the feet of him who brings good tidings, who proclaims peace! O Judah, keep your appointed feasts, perform your vows. For the wicked one shall no more pass through you; he is utterly cut off. (Nahum 1:15)

This separation and protection from Satan is a wonderful promise to those who are blessed to be called to keep God's appointed feasts and to have a part in His work. Yet another reference to beautiful feet appears in the Song of Solomon:

How beautiful are your feet in sandals, O prince's daughter! (Song of Solomon 7:1)

Perhaps the prince's daughter in this case might be symbolic of the Bride of Jesus Christ – the Church of God.

But we tend to mentally balk at the term "beautiful feet"? "Beauty" and "feet"! These are two words that do not seem to go together, and are rarely read together.

Although feet are an incredibly ingenious and complex work of the Creator's engineering, each containing twenty-six bones and thirty-three joints, they are generally unattractive parts of the body – especially male, adult feet. Some feet, as I have already mentioned, are less attractive than others.

Usually, the only feet that could rightly be considered beautiful are those of babies, young children, and, at a stretch, perhaps those of some young people. But alas, with age and use – even if we were to wear steel toed boots all day and every day – our feet would still naturally lose their youthful beauty.

Interestingly, those with beautiful feet are usually people who are too young to be baptized, to have a part in God's work of preaching the gospel of peace, or to attend Passover services. Perhaps there is a message in this when we consider this admonition from Jesus:

At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, “Who then is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” Then Jesus called a little child to him, set him in the midst of them, and said, “Assuredly, I say to you, unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore whoever humbles himself as this little child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Whoever receives one little child like this in my name receives me.” (Matthew 18:1-5)

Child-like humility, then, is the first lesson of Jesus' Foot-Washing ceremony.

Yes, God tells us that there is beauty in the feet of those who have a part in the preaching of His gospel of peace and the bringing of glad tidings of good things to this world. As we have already read in the above scriptures from the prophets Isaiah and Nahum, even before His human sojourn, this preaching of the gospel began with the LORD (YHWH) of what we usually call the Old Testament – the One who became Jesus Christ. Of course, He and His feet were considered beautiful:

One thing I {David} have desired of the LORD, that will I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the LORD, and to inquire in His temple. (Psalms 27:4)

In David's time, the feet of a preacher in God's holy tabernacle were likely bare. The scriptural descriptions of the priests' apparel do not include any footwear. In fact, shoes were forbidden to be worn on what God had consecrated as holy ground (Exodus 3:5;

Joshua 5:15; Acts 7:33). Perhaps speaking from an elevated platform, the eyes of the congregation might naturally rest on the preaching priest's feet.

The glory of Lebanon shall come to you, the cypress, the pine, and the box tree together, to beautify the place of my sanctuary; and I will make the place of my feet glorious. (Isaiah 60:13)

Even the places where the LORD's feet alighted were considered beautiful – even glorious.

And let the beauty of the LORD our God be upon us, and establish the work of our hands for us; yes, establish the work of our hands. (Psalms 90:17)

Yes, we may ask God to bless our physical work from day-to-day. But this psalm was written by Moses. What was his work? His work was the work of God. Our work today – the work of the church – is also the work of God. Jesus' work during His earthly sojourn was the preaching of the gospel. And this same work continues today through Jesus' brothers and sisters.

The First Foot-Washing Ceremony

Let us now go to the thirteenth chapter of John's gospel and let us go through his account of the very first Foot-Washing ceremony, beginning in verse 1:

Now before the feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that His hour had come that He should depart from this world to the Father, having loved His own who were in the world, He loved them to the end. And supper being ended...

This phrase is thought to be better rendered "During supper," because later verses tell us that Jesus returned to the table after the foot-washing, and more eating of food continued. Continuing:

...the devil having already put it into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon's son, to betray Him, Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into His hands, and that He had come from God and was going to God, rose from supper and laid aside His garments...

This laying aside of His garments symbolized Jesus voluntarily laying aside His Godship. His God-life. His God-plane life.

...took a towel and girded Himself.

This taking up and girding himself with a towel – a lowly “garment” much humbler, of course, than His usual garment – may have symbolized Jesus taking up the humbler life of a human being – a humble human being – a servant. His human life was likened in Psalm 22:6 to that of a lowly worm – ground-bound, just as feet are. Continuing in verse 5:

After that, He poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet, and to wipe them with the towel with which He was girded.

As we all know, the job of foot-washing at that time (in the homes that could afford servants, of course) was that of the lowliest servant in a home's “pecking order.”

Here we see the Lord Jesus washing the feet of His disciples – the feet of these mere men who He had been teaching to preach the gospel of peace. Here was He, washing the feet that He had prophesied would become beautiful to Him. He wiped their feet with His towel, which may have symbolized His temporary human life. Symbolically then, He was wiping their feet with His precious life! Verse 6:

Then He came to Simon Peter. And Peter said to Him, “Lord, are you washing my feet?”

Peter strongly objected to his Lord doing this. He may have understood the humility aspect of Jesus actions; but he knew who Jesus truly was. Back in Matthew 16:16, Peter had said: “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” Back to John 13 again, and continuing in verse 7:

Jesus answered and said to him, “What I am doing you do not understand now, but you will know after this.”

Jesus told Peter that he would later – not necessarily right away – understand all the symbolism of the foot-washing – probably through the influence and indwelling of His Holy Spirit.

Peter said to Him, “You shall never wash my feet!” ...

Peter held his ground. He sincerely thought that he was doing the right thing. Paraphrasing, he was saying, “You are the true Christ – the true Messiah – the very Son of God. I cannot allow you to wash my feet!”

... Jesus answered him, “If I do not wash you, you have no part with me.”

So in order to press home His point as gently as possible, Jesus laid down a firm ultimatum to Peter. And in this statement, we see that there was more to the Foot-Washing ceremony than just an outward sign and example of humility. It was necessary for Peter to have his feet washed by Jesus for him to have a part with Jesus – as a spiritual brother, as a fellow son of God, as a co-heir, and as a fellow-worker.

It is the same for us. We wash each other's feet annually as an act of humility and forgiveness. And we submit to having our feet washed by another church member so that we, like Peter, may continue our part with Jesus Christ – our parts as His spiritual brothers and sisters, as fellow sons and daughters of God the Father, as co-heirs with Him (Romans 8:17), and as fellow workers in His great work.

Simon Peter said to Him, “Lord, not my feet only, but also my hands and my head!”

As he did so often, impetuous Peter went overboard. Paraphrasing again, he likely thought, “If I *must* submit to having my feet washed by you, my Saviour, in order for me to have a part with you, then please wash *all* of me. If a little is good, more must be better. All must be best!” He did have the right idea, though, did he not? He did have the right zeal. O that we might emulate Peter's zeal! Verse 10:

Jesus said to him, “He who is bathed needs only to wash his feet, but is completely clean...”

I do not know how often the Jews of that day commonly bathed. Quite frequently, I would think. Jesus implied that He and His disciples had already washed that evening. It is likely that they would have washed their hands before dinner. They may have even already had a servant wash their feet as soon as they entered the house where they were keeping the Passover. Perhaps not. But the feet were the body parts that got dirty first and easiest because of the proximity of their un-socked, sandaled feet to the dusty ground and un-tarred roads of that time and place. Jesus pointed out that, if they had bathed, all it would have taken to be completely clean would be the washing of their feet.

“...and you are clean, but not all of you.”

With this statement, it became very clear that there was more of a spiritual symbolism to this new Foot-Washing ceremony. To enable them to have a future part with Him in His work and His Kingdom, Jesus was symbolically washing and wiping the remaining sins of His disciples away – again, with the towel of His human life!

But not all of them!

For He knew who would betray him; therefore He said, “You are not all clean.”

There was one among them – and Jesus knew which one – who, even though He almost definitely washed Judas' feet along with the other eleven, because of his (Judas') actions, proved that he was rejecting Jesus' example of humility, rejecting His sacrifice. Thus, no amount of spiritual water could remove his spiritual dirt. It is interesting that none of the disciples – including Judas – picked up on or mentioned what Jesus said here.

So when He had washed their feet, taken His garments, and sat down again,...

Jesus removed the towel, He took up his garments once again, and He sat down. These three actions may have symbolized Him voluntarily casting off His human life, retaking His God-plane life, and sitting down again in His heavenly throne-room with His Father:

To him who overcomes I will grant to sit with me on my throne, as I also overcame and sat down with my Father on His throne. (Revelation 3:21)

Back to John 13:12 for Jesus' explanation of the Foot-washing symbolism:

...He said to them, “Do you know what I have done to you?”

He was asking His disciples – who (like us) could be a little dense at times – if they understood the rich meaning and symbolism of what He had just done. In this article, I am just homing in on two of the symbols of Jesus' Foot-Washing ceremony that come to my own limited mind. You may think of others. There may be many more that God might reveal to us as time goes by.

“You call me Teacher and Lord, and you say well, for so I am.”

Perhaps thinking of Peter's recent resistance to His actions, He was saying, “You were right, Peter; I *do* have a very high office.” The Greek word translated here as “Teacher” is “Didaskalos,” which can also be rendered as “Master” as it is in the King James Version.

“If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet.”

Here we read Jesus' clear Foot-Washing Command Number One. Can you see anything difficult or ambiguous in this command? Neither can I. Yet, amazingly, some

commentators claim that this is not a literal command. I have even heard people ridicule the idea of the Foot-Washing ceremony!

Jesus was saying, “If I can humble myself before you, and if I can forgive and wash your sins away, then you must humble yourselves before each other and figuratively wash each others’ sins away – thus forgiving one other.”

“For I have given you an example, that you should do as I have done to you.”

Here we read Jesus’ clear Foot-Washing Command Number Two. Jesus did this as *an example* for His disciples to follow; and, by extension, to future generations of Christians, for us to emulate. How could anyone claim otherwise?

“Most assuredly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master; nor is he who is sent greater than he who sent him.”

The disciples and us – *we* are His servants. Jesus is our Lord, Teacher and Master. We servants are not greater than our Lord Jesus Christ – just as He accepts that He – wonderfully great though He is – is not greater than His Father.

“If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them.”

Here we read Jesus’ clear Foot-Washing Command Number Three. We do know these things – no, not through our own personal cleverness. God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ have given us all of this wonderful knowledge. So we must **do** what He has commanded us. We must not just be hearers of the Word of God! We must be **doers** of His Word (Romans 2:13; James 1:22-25). If we want to be blessed and if we want to have a part with them in their great work and their soon coming Kingdom, we must **do** these things that have been revealed to us.

One of those things is that we must emulate Jesus’ example in all things – including the wonderfully meaningful Foot-Washing service each Passover night.

*John Plunkett
Building Bridges, The Church of God Canada
Qualicum Beach, British Columbia, Canada
March 7, 2011*