

BAPTISM OF JESUS AND ANNOUNCEMENT OF HIS WORK.

– JAN. 2. – MATT. 3:7-17. –

"This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." – Matt. 3:17.

JOHN, the Baptizer, was a fearless minister of the truth, whose courage qualified him well for the work given him to do, the announcement and introduction of our Lord Jesus and the new dispensation which his ministry inaugurated. And unless it be clearly recognized that a great change of dispensation was due and at hand at that time, and that John was the divine agent in announcing that crisis in their affairs to Israel, the lesson before us cannot be rightly appreciated or understood.

At the time in question, Judaism was in many respects in a more flourishing condition than it had ever before been: idolatry in its cruder forms was unknown, and Phariseeism was the controlling influence. The word Pharisee to-day has come to be the synonym of hypocrite and impostor, but at that time it was the name given to and accepted by the professedly most pious class in Israel, people who professed consecration to the Lord, who studied the Law diligently and were zealous in prayer and the propagation of the Jewish religion. It was the time of the greatest missionary effort that had ever been made by the Jews, as our Lord testified, "Ye compass sea and land to make one proselyte." The Sadducees also professed holiness of life, altho they denied much of the Scripture and were practically the "higher critics" in religious matters, among the Jews of that day.

Under these circumstances we may imagine the surprise and consternation which John's preaching would arouse when he addressed members of the leading religious sects as sinners, "a generation of vipers." He thus implied what our Lord plainly stated to the same classes, namely, that their religion was one of outward forms

and ceremony merely, and not of the heart. We fear that if the same inspired teacher were to preach to-day he would similarly address and surprise many who have "a form of godliness" and outward devotion to Sectarianism and to its propagation.

"Who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" We do not understand John's language here to refer to flames and torments after death, but to a wrath of God about to come upon that nation; because of its hypocritical formalism and failure to live up to the light and privileges which it enjoyed. – Compare 1 Thess. 2:16; Rom. 9:22,27-29 and Luke 21:23,24.

The fact that the Scribes and Pharisees came to John and were baptized of him signified repentance and turning to God; but John points out that more than an outward profession of repentance is necessary; that there should be such a reform of life as would yield fruit and clearly show the repentance. He clearly saw that the Jews were resting self-satisfied in the divine promises to Abraham; feeling that because they were his natural offspring they must therefore, necessarily, be the heirs of the promises made to him. Thus God's favor to them was proving an ensnarement, a hindrance to their proper humility of heart and carefulness of life. John would have them see that to be heirs of the Abrahamic promise would necessitate that they should have also Abraham's faith, and works or fruits corresponding and resulting. And he declares, therefore, that God is able to raise up children to Abraham, to inherit the promises, wholly outside of Abraham's fleshly posterity: which he has done during this Gospel age; – taking not stones, but Gentiles for the purpose.

Proceeding, John boldly declares that the testing time, the critical time for them as a people, has come. For centuries they had been the recipients of divine favor and blessings and mercies: now the question with them was, – To be or not to be longer God's peculiar **[R2237 : page 313]** people. The axe of divine judgment is whetted, and the time of crisis has come, and it would thenceforth be an individual matter

and not a national question as to who shall be the children of Abraham. Every one of them in whom would be found the good fruitage of righteousness would be spared of the Lord and transplanted into the more favorable condition of the Gospel dispensation, while every one of them found unworthy would be cut off from divine favor, even tho they outwardly made loud professions. Thus cut down they would be cast into the fire, – the fire of trouble which came upon that nation, the "wrath" of verse seven, which ended with the complete overthrow of their polity.

John recognized and freely stated that his work was merely a reformatory and preparatory work and that the one who was to do the testing was mightier than himself – the Messiah. He declared himself so inferior as to be unworthy to be his sandal-bearer. This greater one, for whom he was the forerunner or introducer or herald, was the one who would bless all those found worthy of a blessing, by baptizing them with the holy spirit from on high; and he also would be the one who would send the "fire," judgment, tribulation or destruction upon the others of that nation found unworthy of the holy spirit. This prophecy of John we recognize as amply and literally fulfilled. Those gathered out as a result first of John's preaching, and subsequently of the preaching of the Lord and his apostles during his ministry, were blessed with the benediction of the holy spirit, the "spirit of adoption," at Pentecost; and others subsequently were gathered and likewise blessed by the ministry of the holy spirit in these; and it was not long after Pentecost before the fires of sedition, strife, envy, malice, hatred, etc., began to burn throughout the land of Israel and ultimately resulted in the utter destruction of their national existence, A.D. 70.

John uses the harvesting process as an illustration of our Lord's work; and this is in full accord with the statement of Scripture, that our Lord in the end of the Jewish age was the reaper or harvester who had a definitely appointed harvesting time, in which he gathered the real wheat of that nation into the Gospel garner and then cleaned up the field by burning the chaff or refuse. John declared that he would

thoroughly cleanse the "wheat," fan out the "chaff" from the "wheat." The separation between the mere professors and the Israelites indeed should be thoroughly and completely accomplished at the hands of this great harvester during the harvest time of that age. The unquenchable fire in which the chaff of that people suffered, was the time of trouble already referred to in verses seven and eleven, which culminated A.D. 70. It was an "*unquenchable* fire" or destruction: they endeavored to quench or stop the trouble many times, but all their [R2237 : page 314] efforts were fruitless: it was unquenchable because the Lord intended that it should thoroughly consume them nationally. Nor have they ever since succeeded in restoring their national polity; nor will they succeed until the full number of the elect Church has been completed (Rom. 11:25), and until the times of the Gentiles (the period apportioned to Gentile governments, Luke 21:24) shall have run their course, A.D. 1915.

Another Scripture shows us that our Lord at this time, when coming to John to be baptized of him, was thirty years of age. The age of thirty was the beginning of manhood's estate according to the Law, and since John was only six months older than Jesus, it is the reasonable presumption that he had been preaching just six months before our Lord's baptism occurred. John's objection to the baptism of Jesus (his cousin) whose nobility of birth and character he already recognized (Luke 1:41-44), was because he recognized baptism only from the Jewish standpoint, and not from the standpoint of the new dispensation, which began with our Lord. John's baptism of the Jews signified merely a repentance of sin and reformation of life. But not so our Lord Jesus' baptism: it meant another thing entirely. Our Lord had no sins to repent of, nor to reform from, being "holy, harmless, separate from sinners," as John also recognized. Our Lord's baptism signified *consecration*, a full giving up or burial of the will, its immersion into the will of God. Our Lord made such a consecration himself at the earliest moment possible under the Law, thirty years of age. And now he was merely symbolizing that real baptism by a water baptism, which constituted an outward confession of his consecration

to God, and was an example for all who should afterward seek to walk in his footsteps.

As our Lord came up out of the water the Father granted a special manifestation of approval, by communicating to him the holy spirit, marking his acceptance and sealing him as the heir of the blessings already promised. Not only was the holy spirit given, but an outward manifestation of the gift was granted, especially to John; that he might know of a surety that Jesus was the Messiah, accepted of God as such, and might announce him to those who had accepted his ministry and become truly repentant of sins and desirous of bearing the fruits of righteousness. It does not appear that the multitude saw the manifestation of the spirit in the form of a dove lighting down upon our Lord. – John 1:29-34.

Why the form of a dove should be adopted for a manifestation of the holy spirit is a question. We presume because a dove is a fit representative or emblem of gentleness and meekness; and from the time that a dove returned to the Ark of Noah, with an olive branch in its mouth, both the dove and the olive branch have been symbols of peace and good will. The dove, therefore, was a most fitting emblem of the spirit of meekness, patience, long suffering, brotherly-kindness, love, and faithfulness which is the spirit of the Father – the holy spirit.

At this same time came a voice from heaven, saying, "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." It would appear that such a voice was heard on three different occasions. (1) At the time of our Lord's baptism here narrated. (2) On the mount of transfiguration. (Mark 9:7.) (3) At the close of our Lord's ministry, just before the crucifixion. (John 12:28.) Yet apparently these voices, while understood and appreciated by some as attestations to our Lord's acceptance with the Father, were by others variously attributed; some saying that an angel had spoken and others that it thundered. (John 12:28,29.) And so it seems to be with every manifestation of divine truth. Those who are in a right attitude of heart can and do receive the

Lord's message and find abundant ground for faith and trust; while others, out of harmony with the divine arrangement, are continually therefore skeptical and lacking of to them satisfactory evidence. The truth, evidently, then as now, was meat only for those who hunger and thirst after righteousness; and these who have the hearing ear are such as have honesty of heart and a full consecration to the Lord.

To draw a lesson from these things specially applicable to our own day should be a part of our object. We have come to the "harvest" time of the Gospel age: again the Chief Reaper is present; not in the flesh, to be a sin-offering, but now in the glory of his exalted divine nature. The axe is laid to the root of the trees again. It is no longer a question of being a citizen of favored Christendom, nor of being a member of its various sects; but it is an individual test. Every one (not every individual in the world, just as it was not every individual in the world in the days of John the baptizer – then it was every one in the Jewish nation, now it is every one in the nominal Christendom, and does not at all refer to the masses of heathendom) is now to be subjected to certain tests, and by these tests he will either be accepted and further blessed or be rejected and suffer the consequences. The testings of the "harvest" of this age which are parallel to those of the Jewish age and were typified thereby, are clearly pointed out in our Lord's discourse of Matt. 13:24-43. The Jewish harvest is spoken of as being a separation of wheat from chaff, while the harvest of this age is designated a separation of "wheat" from "tares." As the Jews little realized that the Lord and his apostles in their ministry were doing this separating work by the preaching of the truth, so nominal Christendom little realizes to-day that a similar work and separation as between "wheat" and "tares" is now in progress. As the Jews in general failed to recognize the gathering of the "wheat" of their age into the garner of the Gospel dispensation, so nominal Christians to-day fail to see that the "wheat" of this age is being gathered by the Lord into his garner, the Kingdom. As the Jews failed to recognize the binding and blinding influences which came upon them and enkindled amongst them the fires of judgment, wrath, destruction, so nominal Christians

to-day, while they recognize the peculiar binding together in social bundles now in progress, and while they see all the preparations for the coming great social revolution, time of trouble, wrath, burning, destruction of present systems, etc., are nevertheless blind respecting what all these things really mean, and fail to see that these are features of the "harvest" work now in progress, under the supervision of the great Reaper. They fail also to recognize him present, notwithstanding the repeated declaration, similar to that made by John at the first advent – "There standeth one among you whom ye know not."
