

PREACHING OF JOHN THE BAPTIZER.

– *JANUARY 21. – LUKE 3:1-17. –*

"Prepare ye the way of the Lord."

DOUBTLESS many commenters on this lesson will claim that John the Baptizer's ministry began with the year A.D. 26, and by positiveness of assertion seek to make up for their lack of evidence on this subject. Let all therefore bear in mind that such a dating of John's ministry will be purely arbitrary, to make it conform to the erroneous view which prevails among scholars in respect to the date of our Lord's birth. It should not be forgotten, however, that, altho it is well established from the Scriptures that our Lord was six months younger than his second-cousin, John, there is no other Scriptural date which so closely and definitely connects the history of our Lord and of John the Baptizer with general history, as does the statement of this very lesson, that John began his ministry (when he was thirty years of age) in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar. Those who claim that Jesus began his ministry A.D. 27, instead of A.D. 29, claim that John's ministry began in A.D. 26; and in order to make this fit with the statement of the first verse of [R2562 : page 22] this lesson, they are obliged to count the reign of Tiberius Caesar two years before its admitted date. For a particular discussion of this subject, however, we must refer our readers to MILLENNIAL DAWN, VOL. II., p.54.

Of John it is written that he was filled with the holy spirit from his birth. But we must not misunderstand this to mean that he was begotten of the holy spirit, in the sense that Christians are begotten of it, for he lived before the time of spirit-begetting – in the Jewish age, not in the Gospel or Christian age. Thus our Lord said of him that, altho there had not arisen a greater Prophet than John, nevertheless, the least in the Kingdom of God is greater than he – the least one in the house of sons is on a higher plane than the greatest one in the house of servants. (Matt.

11:11; Heb. 3:5,6.) The Apostle again explains that "the holy spirit was *not yet given*, because Jesus was not yet glorified." – John 7:39.

In harmony with this we must understand that John was filled with the holy spirit, holy power or influence from God from his birth, after the same manner that the other prophets throughout the Jewish age had been under that holy spirit. The expression would lead us to understand that, altho John was not borne immaculate, as was Jesus, he nevertheless was well born, under holy influences, which tended to develop in him natural characteristics suitable to the mission he was intended of God to fulfil. This does not involve the thought of divine interference with the free will of the individual, for Paul tells us that he also was chosen of God from his birth to be a special servant to do a special work. (Gal. 1:15.) Nevertheless, the Lord did not interfere with his exercising his own free will, even permitting him to go so far into blind error as to become the persecutor of the Church. And even when the Lord rebuked him in the way to Damascus, that was not an interference with his *will* or nature, but merely a removal of his blindness, his ignorance, permitting his true will to come into exercise. And so no doubt others of the Lord's people from time to time have been from earliest childhood special subjects of divine Providence which has guided and shaped their experiences without interfering with their wills, so as to make of them *special instruments* for the accomplishment of divine purposes.

Of John's life from infancy to manhood we know nothing except the bare record, "The child grew and waxed strong in spirit, and was in the desert until the day of his showing unto Israel" (Luke 1:80) – not in the sandy deserts, but more properly in the wilds, the uncultivated regions, perhaps in the "hill country," where his parents resided at the time of his birth. Possibly a part of the Lord's providence in respect to John's training for his work consisted in the ordering of the affairs of his parents, so that possibly they were forced by circumstances to reside in such a wilderness-home, where they would have comparatively little intercourse with others, and where John, probably

as a forester, would have the experiences which the Lord saw would best fit him for the work intended. All Christians should learn to trust to the Heavenly Father's guidance, remembering his special promise, which is applicable to each one who is in Christ, *viz.*, that "all things shall work together for good to them that love God," and remembering this they should be content with the lot which Providence seems to mark out for them – not indolent, but content, when they have done all that their hands find to do, – not restless, peevish, dissatisfied, complainers against God and his providence. "Trust in the Lord and do good." It may be that the Lord is fitting and preparing us individually for some special service, and that the permitted experiences alone will prepare us for that service. Indeed, we know from the Word that God designs his "elect" for joint-heirship with our dear Redeemer in the glorious Millennial Kingdom; and we can well realize that because of our imperfection we need much moulding and fashioning, chiseling and polishing to make us "meet for the inheritance of the saints in light." We are to remember also that we are incompetent to judge of our own imperfections, and hence incompetent to judge of the experiences which would be most helpful to us. It is difficult for us sometimes even to see ourselves as others see us; much more difficult, undoubtedly, it would be to see ourselves from the divine standpoint. Here faith in God comes to the front – "This is the victory which overcometh the world, even your faith."

The time of John's "showing" or presentation to Israel was undoubtedly the time when he reached the **[R2563 : page 22]** legally required thirty years of age; and then it was that the word of the Lord came unto him, causing him to begin his mission. We are not to think of this expression as having to John the same signification as it has to us who are of this Gospel age. The word of God came to John as a prophet, for our Lord declared, – "There hath not arisen a greater prophet than John the Baptist." The Lord made clear to John that the time had come for the beginning of his ministry, not merely by an impression or surmise, but with positiveness, as in the case of all the prophets. In harmony with his commission he went to the thickly

settled regions in the vicinity of the River Jordan, preaching repentance – that the people should reform – and baptizing in the Jordan those who professed a reformation. For this reason John sought the pools or deep places of the river; – for instance, he went to Enon, near to Salem, "because there was much water there" – a pool sufficiently deep for the purposes of immersion. [R2563 : page 23]

We are not to fall into the too common error of supposing from the record that John preached to the people that *repentance and baptism* would work for them *a remission of their sins*. To so interpret these words would put them in direct conflict with the entire testimony of the Scriptures, which is to the effect that without the shedding of blood there is no remission of sins. The usual representation of this subject is therefore clearly in error. To the contrary, we are to understand this verse to mean that John preached a baptism signifying repentance *unto*, or *preparation for*, a remission of sins. The time had not yet come for the blotting out of the sins, and John neither had nor could have obtained authority to declare sins remitted because of repentance and baptism. Had it been possible for him to have made such a proclamation, truthfully, it would have proven that there was no necessity for the coming of our Lord Jesus to *give himself a ransom* for Israel and for all the families of the earth. If repentance and immersion in water would bring the forgiveness of sins, the "Savior and a great one" whom God had promised to Israel for so long would have been wholly unnecessary. But when we view John's work and preaching as merely a preliminary one, to make ready a repentant people, desiring to have their sins forgiven, desiring full at-one-ment with God, and expecting a Savior to accomplish all this, – then all is harmony.

And this thought, that the remission of sins was a work future from John's day, a work to be accomplished by Christ, is fully borne out by the succeeding context, a quotation from Isaiah the Prophet, which has not even yet been fulfilled, but includes the entire work of the Millennial age. That age will be one for *remission of sins* and *blotting out of sins*, and the full reconciliation of so many as will accept God's

grace in Christ under the New Covenant. (Compare Acts 3:19-21.) In that time, under those favorable conditions, and not before, will the statement be fulfilled, "All flesh shall see the salvation of God."

We are to bear in mind that John's work as a messenger was exclusively to Israel, and had nothing whatever to do with any of the Gentiles. To Israel he acted as the Elijah or Forerunner of *Messiah in the flesh*, seeking to induce that nation, in *its* "harvest" time, to accept the formal offer of God's Kingdom by accepting Jesus as the King. But John's mission was not successful to his nation, and profited only a few of the people; those few who believed John's testimony, and received it into good and honest and repentant hearts, were prepared to *receive* Jesus and to appreciate and *receive* the remission of sins offered by God through him. The remainder of that nation, rejecting John's teaching, and being in an unrepentant condition of heart, were not properly exercised, were not ready for Jesus, and did not appreciate the offer of remission of sins through his blood as a consequence, and as a nation were rejected of God and wholly overthrown.

While John thus acted as the Elijah in introducing Jesus in the flesh to fleshly Israel, and gathered out a certain class who were ready to receive Jesus, and who were blessed by him, so we see that in God's plan there is a greater antitype of Elijah than was John, as there is a greater Christ than was our Lord Jesus. The greater Christ is the spiritual one, "The Lord from heaven" – "Now the Lord is that Spirit." And this glorified spirit Lord is the Head of "the Church which is his body," and this body of many members will, in "the first resurrection," be made like him and to share his glory, and with him and under him constitute the *great Messiah*, who shall take unto himself his great power and reign, establishing God's Kingdom amongst men, and causing his will to be done "on earth as it is done in heaven." (Matt. 6:10.) The coming into power of this great Christ, the spiritual Christ (head and body) constitutes the Second Advent to mankind – "the manifestation of the sons of God" for the deliverance of the groaning creation. (Rom. 8:17-19.) Thus the Second Advent of Christ the Head

(with the Church his body) will be seen to be on a very much higher plane than was the first advent of our Lord in the flesh, altho the first advent was all-important in that without it and its sacrifice for sins there could have been no Second Advent of Jesus, the Head, in the glory of Kingdom power, and there could have been no glorified members of his body to be associated with him.

After thus noting the relationship of the two events, it is proper for us to note also that as the blessings of the first advent were offered to nominal fleshly Israel so the presentation of the blessings of the Second Advent will be to nominal Spiritual Israel ("Christendom"), and as a Forerunner or herald was appropriately sent to fleshly Israel, to prepare them for the first advent, likewise it would be appropriate that a proportionately greater Forerunner should precede the Second Advent, and seek to make ready therefor all nominal Spiritual Israelites. As we have already shown,* this greater Elijah, who heralds the spiritual Christ, is composed of many members; Jesus in the flesh was himself the Head of this Elijah class, and all of his true followers, who will be, when glorified with him, members of the glorious Christ, will have previously been in their earthly lives members with him of the Elijah class, whose mission it is to show forth the principles of righteousness and true holiness, and to exhort both by word and conduct all men to repentance and to preparation for the Second Advent – the glorious appearing, the setting up of the Messianic Kingdom, the actual blotting out of sins, the **[R2563 : page 24]** straightening of every crooked way, the leveling up of deep crevices of character, the leveling down of the hills of pride to the proper level of humility; and in every sense of the word *seeking to prepare all flesh* to see the salvation of God.

[*MILLENNIAL DAWN, VOL. II., Chap. 8.](#)

Nevertheless, we are to remember that the Scriptures distinctly indicate that the testimony of this greater Elijah will be equally unsuccessful with that of the lesser antitype of Elijah, John the Baptizer. The Church in the flesh has not succeeded in making straight the paths of the Lord for a triumphal entry to his Kingdom upon the

earth. A few have heard, but the message has utterly failed as respects the vast majority, even those who profess respect for and to be waiting for the Kingdom. Nevertheless, all God's good purposes will be ultimately accomplished, tho necessarily introduced by troubles, calamities, distress upon "Christendom," in the end of this age or "harvest" time, similar to those troubles which came upon fleshly Israelites who were unready for the Savior, and "knew not the time of their visitation," at his first advent. All this unreadiness, however, shall not hinder the work of the Messiah. As at his first advent he gathered all Israelites indeed to the new dispensation, so now he will gather his elect "little flock" to himself; his Kingdom will be established; it shall rule over all; it will accomplish the straightening of every crooked path; it will level up the path of righteousness and holiness, and make of it "a highway" freed from stumbling blocks of error and from Satan's deception. (Isa. 35:8,9.) All mankind then brought to a knowledge of the *truth* will have the privilege of progressing through the times of restitution up this grand highway of obedience to the grand perfection lost for himself and his race by father Adam's transgression, but redeemed for Adam and his race by the precious blood of Christ. All flesh indeed shall see the salvation of our God, and so many as will may share therein, for this is the blessing which God has provided for all the families of the earth, through the true spiritual Seed of Abraham – Christ and his elect Church. – Gal. 3:16,29.

It would seem that John's ministry at first was somewhat popular, notwithstanding his probably uncouth "backwoods" appearance and great plainness of speech; so that great multitudes came to him: amongst these were some who seemed to John to be so vile that he could not properly accept them until they had given some proofs of reform. These he denominates "children of vipers" – very harsh language, we would be inclined to say. We are not to understand that such language is proper to be copied by the Lord's people of to-day. We are rather to suppose that there were special conditions at that time which made this language appropriate, and that John, as a prophet, was divinely guided into giving this sharp reproof. The Lord's people of the

Gospel age are instructed on the contrary to speak with meekness, gentleness, patience, long-suffering, etc., – "in meekness instructing those that oppose themselves" – "reproving with all long-suffering." The Lord's people of today are under general instructions of God's Word, as regards all their conduct, and are not to depart therefrom unless it would be under special divine direction, as were the prophets of old – [R2564 : page 24] such as is not given to any at the present time so far as we are aware.

When John speaks of his hearers "fleeing from the wrath to come," we are not to get the thought that he preached, or that the people believed in, the doctrine of eternal torment, and that the words referred to this. Quite to the contrary, there is no such teaching in the Scriptures. The "wrath to come" referred to by John prophetically was the trouble that was about to come upon that nation unless they would receive Messiah, who had not yet been offered to them, but who would shortly appear, and for whose appearance they were to make ready by true repentance and baptism. The "wrath to come" *did come* upon the nation because of its rejection of Messiah, as our Lord and the Apostle Paul specially testify. (See Luke 21:23; Rom. 9:22; 1 Thes. 2:16.) It burned fiercely against them in the great time of trouble which led to the collapse of their national polity in A.D. 69-70, and they have been under that wrath and unable to reestablish themselves as a nation from that day to the present time. We shall find confirmation of this interpretation of the "wrath to come" further down in this lesson.

In John's preaching he found one difficulty, and that was that his hearers were imbued with the thought that they were God's specially chosen, "elect" people, whose glorification had been foretold in the prophets, and that since there were no better people in the world it was unreasonable to suppose that God would pass by the very best. They reasoned that he must take some, in order to fulfil his promises; and that they were not only the most obedient to his Law outwardly, but also were the natural seed of Abraham, to whom the promises were made. Likewise the principal opposition to the teaching of holiness,

entire consecration to the Lord, today throughout "Christendom," is the same error. A false theory has gotten into the minds of Christian people, which leads them to reason that holiness cannot be essential to the Lord's favor. Their process of reasoning is this: Out of the sixteen hundred millions of the world's population there are only about three hundred millions that make the slightest profession of Christianity, and this includes all the Greek Catholics, Roman Catholics, and what Bishop Foster (M.E.) designated the "ring-straked and speckled" of [R2564 : page 25] Protestantism – infants and all. Now, say they, God must certainly intend to have some, and if he takes *all* kinds of Christians he will have only comparatively few, and if merely an ambition to be ahead of the devil were to move him, he could scarcely reject any who claim to be Christians, and who are even half-way decent. Consequently they reason that holiness to the Lord, sanctification of thought and word and deed, cannot be essential to divine favor, and is therefore rather carrying matters to an extreme. The declaration that only "the pure in heart shall see God," and that "without holiness no man shall see the Lord," are, to them, extreme statements, and must be passed by, or else the word "holiness" must be considered as used in olden times in a very restricted sense, as meaning not openly or violently wicked.

Thus we see that the antitypical Elijah to the Jews encountered the same difficulties that are encountered now by the antitypical Elijah ministering to nominal spiritual Israel. But note John's answer; he laid down the conditions very strictly: Do not permit yourselves to be deceived into thinking that God is under compulsion to accept such as you, and that otherwise his word would become void; do not think that he could not get children of Abraham that would be purer than you, and therefore that he must take you; God is unlimited in power and unlimited in resource, and, if necessary, he could raise up children to Abraham out of these stones – out of some that you consider as far from the possibilities of being Abraham's children as tho they were these stones at your feet. And similarly we answer "Christendom" today, that God utterly rejects hypocritical Christianity, as represented by the vast

majority of its professors, still blinded by the god of this world, and ignorant of the true character of God and of Jesus Christ whom he has sent; because not pure in heart, not consecrated fully to the Lord. Would that we had a trumpet voice that we might tell the millions of nominal Christendom the true state of the case, and would that they had circumcised ears to hear and reform, and be prepared for the glorious events now due to be ushered in, – without being obliged to pass through the great trouble time. All we can assure them is that God will find the full number of his elect, and that the full number is nearly complete now, and that in all it is but a "little flock" to whom it is the Father's good pleasure to give the Kingdom; and that soon these will all be glorified with their glorious Head and Lord, and that then the Kingdom established will be revealed to bless all the families of the earth. Nevertheless, we deeply sympathize with them in the fact that their condition necessitates that the introduction of the Kingdom shall be with a time of trouble such as was not since there was a nation, and, thank God, shall never again be. – Dan. 12:1; Matt. 24:21.

John, proceeding with his discourse, points out to his Jewish hearers that the time of *judgment* had come upon *their nation*. The axe was laid at the root of the trees; every Israelite who was not an Israelite indeed was to be overthrown, and to be cast into the "fire" of trouble with which that age and national polity terminated. The three and a half years of our Lord's ministry to the Jewish nation, and their final rejection by him, are represented by the barren fig tree parable, in harmony with the statement of John foregoing. – See Luke 13:6-9.

John evidently struck the chord of fear to some extent, but he struck it properly. There is a proper presentation of the truth, and a proper fear of God and his retribution, which may properly be kept before the mind of the transgressor; but this is wholly different from the terrorizing fear of eternal torment, which plays so important a part in all the theological teaching, directly and indirectly, today, and which has driven some to insanity, some to skepticism and infidelity, and has hindered the great majority even of saints from appreciating the true

character and plan of our God. Let us present the wrath to come, truthfully, not misrepresenting the character of our God; for assuredly God will not hold them guiltless who blaspheme his holy name.

Under John's preaching the people began to inquire what course they should pursue, and summing the matter up John's instruction was that they should practice justice, mercy, love, generosity; they should avoid violence, extortion, etc.; and should seek to be content with such things as they had. This was excellent advice, and undoubtedly those who followed it would be in just the right condition of heart and mind to welcome the Lord Jesus, and his good tidings of *remission of sins through his blood* and thus to become reconciled with the Father. And similarly if any now inquire respecting the coming trouble, the wrath that is to come in the end of this age upon "Christendom," – What must we do? We answer them, – Practice righteousness, truth, godliness, kindness, benevolence, justice, trust in the Lord, seek to walk in his ways. Or we may quote them the words of the prophet, specially bearing upon this time, viz., "Seek meekness, seek righteousness; it may be that ye shall be hid in the day of the Lord's anger." (Zeph. 2:3.) And furthermore, we may rely upon it that those who thus seek righteousness, etc., will be the ones most ready to welcome our King, and his Kingdom, and we may be sure that when in this harvest time some fail to make their calling and election sure, and prove themselves unworthy of the crowns apportioned to them, the Lord will be pleased to select from among such penitent seekers of righteousness some as substitutes to complete his elect Church.

So powerful was John's presentation of the truth, [R2564 : page 26] that the people began to wonder whether or not he might be the Coming One, the Messiah, but he set the thought at rest speedily, assuring him that he was so inferior to the Messiah that he would be unworthy the honor of doing toward him the most menial service of removing his sandals. Then, having given them a little glimpse of the character of Messiah, he proceeded to tell them respecting his work, that it would be higher than his own, and that those who received him

would receive a higher baptism also: "He shall baptize you with the holy spirit and with fire" – some of them (the few) with holy spirit, the remainder (the mass) with the fire, – judgments, the great time of trouble which destroyed their national life and many individual lives.

He gave them an illustration of the matter, showing them that they had reached the harvest-time of their age, and that now a separating was to be expected – the separating of the true wheat from the chaff; and he represented our Lord's work with Israel as being that of a reaper winnowing the "wheat," freeing it from the "chaff" element. How forceful was the figure! how true the facts! Our Lord indeed gathered from that nation all the true "wheat," we may be sure that not a solitary grain was lost. All that wheat was gathered into his barn, into a place of safety, into a higher dispensation, – they constituted the beginning or first members of the Gospel Church. It was upon this wheat class that the holy spirit came at Pentecost, and it has abode with this true Church since. After the separating (winnowing) of the "wheat," and the gathering into the barn, and its baptism of the holy spirit, in due time, the "chaff" of that nation was burned up with *unquenchable fire* – a time of trouble which *nothing could stop* or hinder. It will be remembered that various steps were taken to hinder the destruction of the nation of Israel, but all failed: even the Roman Emperor was desirous of preserving the nation, and of establishing [R2565 : page 26] order there, and the Roman army went not to destroy them but to establish peace in their midst; but the Lord had declared that the fire of trouble which he enkindled should not be quenched by any power, that it should do its work to the full; and it did.

Likewise it will be with the great "fire" of trouble with which this Gospel age shall end, and into which the "tare" class of Christendom will be cast; it will not be an utter destruction of life (altho many lives will perish in the great trouble of this Day of Wrath), but it will completely consume earthly governments and Churchianity in a fire of anarchy. Nothing shall quench that fire, or hinder that utter destruction of present systems. But praise God that when this fire shall have

consumed the stubble and the falsities and deceptions of present institutions, it will have but prepared the way for the great blessing which he has designed and provided for in his coming Kingdom. This "fire," and the blessing to follow it, are particularly referred to in Zeph. 3:8,9.
