

PREPARATION FOR THE KINGDOM.

– MARK 1:1-11. – JANUARY 28 –

Golden Text: – "Prepare your hearts unto the Lord, and serve him only." – I Sam. 7:3.

JOHN THE BAPTIST was our Lord's forerunner, foretold in the Old Testament Scriptures, as indicated by the opening statements of this lesson. He was the messenger of Jehovah to announce Messiah and to do a work amongst the Jewish people, which is prophetically described as making straight or ready the path before him. We are not to confound this reference to a messenger of Jehovah preparing the way before Jesus with the title given to our Lord himself, the "Messenger of the Covenant." Both John and Jesus were messengers or representatives, but the latter, on a far higher scale, was the Messenger through whom God's covenant with mankind was about to be established – the Messenger or Mediator of the New Covenant, sealed through the precious blood, and to become operative to the world in general during the Millennial age.

HERALDING THE MESSIAH

As the Scriptures point out, John was just six months older than Jesus, and as both began their ministries at the age of thirty, it follows that John had been preaching just six months when Jesus came to him for baptism at the opening of his ministry. What kind of a work did John do during those six months? The answer is given us in verses seven and eight. He announced himself the forerunner, the trumpeter as it were, of the great Messiah, and declared that it was necessary that the people should come into a condition of heart-repentance if they would

be ready for the Messiah and prepared to enjoy the blessings and favors of God which Messiah would dispense. John made no pretensions of being the Messiah himself, but humbly declared that the one who would be shortly made known to Israel as Messiah was so much greater that he (John) would not be worthy to stoop down and loose the fastenings of his shoes – his sandals. He proclaimed that those who would be ready for Messiah and the Kingdom should not only renounce sin and reform their lives but should publicly declare the same – symbolizing it by a baptism in water. And yet he assured them that this baptism which he performed for them was as nothing compared to that greater baptism which Messiah would give to the faithful – a baptism of the holy Spirit; yea, also, to some a baptism of fire.

John's prophetic message was most distinctly fulfilled. Those Israelites indeed who received Jesus as the Messiah were in due time, at Pentecost, baptized with the holy Spirit from the Father as members of the body of Christ. Moreover, a work of grace was continued with the Jewish nation, and for over thirty years the apostles and other believers sifted thoroughly that people for every true grain of wheat and gathered them into the Gospel garner – into the anointed body, the Church. Then, all the true wheat having been found, the fire came upon the remainder of that nation – the fire of trouble which consumed and destroyed their national polity, causing indescribable suffering and scattering the remainder of that people throughout the earth. Some were baptized with the holy Spirit and some with fire.

GOD'S UNPRETENTIOUS SERVANT

John the Baptist is described as the last of the prophets. With him the old dispensation terminated, as with our Lord the new dispensation began. Apparently adopting somewhat the manner and dress of Elijah of old, his prototype, John, was conspicuous amongst the people by reason of the simplicity of

his dress, which indicated that his entire life was devoted to the special service of the Lord – that he was not seeking to serve earthly or selfish interests in any respect – comparatively he had nothing, wanted nothing, needed nothing. The messenger of Jehovah, he could have been provided for sumptuously; but as God would speak not merely to the great but especially to the humble and lowly, his representative or messenger appeared amongst men under humble conditions. And it was the most humble that had the hearing ear for the Lord's message. Nevertheless we are informed that great multitudes went out, and excitement prevailed amongst the people – a revival service. John and his disciples were kept busily engaged telling the people that Messiah was near, that the Kingdom would shortly be set up, that they must repent of their sins if they would be ready for a share in that Kingdom, and baptizing those who, turning to God, confessed their sins.

When Jesus came to John and requested baptism another account tells us that John demurred, declaring that our Lord had no sins that he needed to repent of – that if either one needed baptism it was John himself. The inference is that John did not urge any to be baptized, except such as realized themselves to be transgressors against the Law, who had not been living up to its requirements to the extent of their ability, and that himself and others who had been living consistent lives did not need this baptism. We are to remember the Apostle's words, that the whole nation of Israel had been baptized into Moses in the sea and in the cloud when they left Egypt. (I Cor. 10:2.) They were still in Moses, cept as they had neglected the Law Covenant which he established. John's baptism was intended to bring the hearts of the people back into accord with the Law, into accord with Moses, that thus they might be ready for transfer from Moses to Christ – from the typical house of servants to be made the antitypical house of sons. "For Moses verily was faithful as a

servant over his house, but Christ as a son over his house, whose house are we if we hold fast." – Heb. 3:5,6.

HOLY, HARMLESS, SEPARATE FROM SINNERS

The Lord did not say to John, "You are mistaken, I am a sinner," for he never denied what the Scriptures [R3712 : page 31] everywhere set forth – that he was holy, harmless, undefiled and totally separate from the race of sinners. Indeed he did not explain to John why he was baptized nor what his baptism signified. John could not have understood, none could understand our Lord's motives until after Pentecost. In the light of the New Testament we see that our Lord's baptism was a new thing, totally distinct from John's baptism; that it symbolized or represented a baptism unto death – a burial of the will into the will of God, and the beginning of a reckonedly new life as a reckonedly new creature, symbolized by the rising from the water.

Thus our Lord's baptism into water symbolized a baptism into death, a consecration to death; and this consecration he fulfilled in the subsequent three and a half years of his ministry, which ended on the cross with his cry, "It is finished." And this is the baptism which belongs to us his followers – not a washing away of sins, not a returning to Mosaic covenant relationship as Jews but a consecration of our justified selves, the presentation of our mortal bodies, living sacrifices, holy, acceptable to God, our reasonable service – to be completed in our natural death and in our resurrection beyond the veil.

"MY BELOVED SON"

An account of this same baptism of our Lord in another Gospel represents John as saying, "I, John, saw and bare record" – respecting the dove, etc. This lesson merely recites the fact that the heavens were opened and the Spirit like a dove descended

upon the Lord, and a voice from heaven said, "Thou art my beloved son, in whom I am well pleased" – without saying he saw the dove or heard the voice. Our thought is that John the Baptist alone witnessed this testimony to our Lord's relationship to God, that he alone saw the messenger of divine favor, and that he and Jesus alone heard and understood the voice. It was not necessary that others should see and hear. John was to be the witness, and this evidence was given him in order that he might declare, as he did, that the Lord had previously given him an assurance that the one upon whom he should see the holy Spirit descend and abide was the Messiah, and that this prediction was fulfilled upon the person of Jesus.

Similarly throughout this Gospel age the world knoweth us not: it sees not our anointing of the holy Spirit. It merely knows that the claim is made for the Church that, as the body of Christ, its members are recipients of the same holy Spirit that came upon Jesus the Head – that we are all baptized by the one Spirit into one body. (I Cor. 12:13.) All that the world can see is the fact of this baptism. The effect upon the Lord was his devotion to his Father's work, the ministry of the Truth, even at the cost of the sacrifice of his life. And so with the Church also; it has a ministry of the Truth even unto death – laying down our lives for the brethren. The world recognizes a difference between this spirit and the worldly spirit, and yet knows not, appreciates not, but thinks rather of the Lord's faithful as they thought of Jesus and the apostles – that they are unwise, foolish, in spending time, influence, talent, means, in what the world regards as the "foolishness of preaching."

We have seen in previous lessons that while John was a partial antitype of Elijah on a limited scale, he by no means fulfilled the entire type. He was, we might say, an antitype on a small scale to the little nation of Israel. The Kingdom was indeed offered to natural Israel, but only a remnant of that people had

heartily repented of sin and were truly ready to welcome Messiah, and the rest were blinded, while the few were received of the Lord at Pentecost and became the nucleus or foundation of the Kingdom which, during this Gospel age, has progressed in development in embryo – unborn, unseen of the world, unknown. Soon the completed embryo will be born in the resurrection, and thus the Kingdom will be fully established in power and great glory – the Christ.

Not only are we called of God to be heirs of God and joint-heirs with Jesus Christ in the Kingdom which is soon to be established under the whole heavens, but, additionally, **[R3713 : page 31]** we are privileged of the Lord now to be the antitypical Elijah, the antitypical John the Baptist. Throughout the entire Gospel age the Church in the flesh has been doing toward the world a work similar to that done by John to the Jewish nation – announcing Messiah, not in the flesh, but the glorified Christ, Head and body, and the Kingdom which he will set up. This greater John the Baptist or greater antitype of Elijah, the Church in the flesh, has exhorted the world, or as many of them as have had ears to hear the message, to repent of sin, to reform their lives, to come near to the Lord in heart, that they may be prepared for the great changes that are imminent, when Messiah shall now shortly take unto himself his great power and reign.

Those who accept the message are urged to make a consecration of themselves to the Lord and thus to prepare their hearts for his Kingdom. Our announcement also is that the great Christ of glory will shortly appear on the scene and that all in harmony with him will then receive a blessing of the holy Spirit – not the first fruits but the completed blessing, the resurrection to glory, honor and immortality – while to the remainder of mankind will come the great time of trouble spoken of by the mouth of the holy prophets from the beginning, a time of discipline and purification, that the whole world may learn the

lessons necessary to their harmony with the Lord, that they may be ready to receive the blessing which his Kingdom will put within their reach.

Let us, dear brethren and sisters, who are privileged to be heralds of the coming Kingdom, be earnest, zealous as was John the Baptist, giving comparatively little heed to the customs and formalities of the world, and giving very diligent heed to our appointed work, to show forth the praises of our heavenly Bridegroom, to announce him to all, to make known to all the terms and conditions of his favor and to bear witness to his presence now in the harvest time of this age, that his fan is in his hand, that he will thoroughly purge the threshing-floor of all chaff, that he will gather the wheat into the garner of his Kingdom, and that the great majority of Christendom will soon enter the great time of trouble. If faithful in this ministry as the antitypical Elijah on this side the veil, we may feel sure of our acceptance as members of the body of the Anointed One on the other side the veil, and thus have participation in the sufferings of the present time and in the glories and dignities of the future.
