

THE LAST OF THE PROPHETS

- *JANUARY 2. - MATTHEW 3:1-12. -*

**Golden Text: – "The voice of one crying in the wilderness,
Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his paths straight."
– V. 3.**

JOHN the Baptist was the last of the prophets and, as Jesus declares, "one of the greatest." To him was committed the honorable service of directly announcing the Savior, who said of him, "Verily I say unto you, Among them that are born of women there hath not risen a greater than John the Baptist; notwithstanding, he that is least in the Kingdom of heaven is greater than he." (Matt. 11:11.) The last representative of the "house of servants," he discharged the duties of his office with dignity, declaring Jesus to be the long-promised Messiah-King, who was about to select a Bride class, to be his joint-heirs in his Kingdom. The Prophet recognized that he himself was not eligible to this class, yet rejoiced in his privilege of announcing the Bridegroom, saying, "He that hath the Bride is the Bridegroom; but the friend of the bridegroom, which standeth and heareth him, rejoiceth greatly because of the bridegroom's voice; this my joy therefore is fulfilled." – John 3:29.

The Scriptures maintain a clear distinction between people of God prior to Pentecost, called friends and servants of God, and the people of God since Pentecost, called the sons of God. The latter are sons because begotten of the holy Spirit to a new nature – a spirit nature – to be fully attained by a share in the First Resurrection. This important point is distinctly marked by St. Paul. After recounting the faithfulness of God's people of the past, who had this testimony, "That they pleased God," he declares "All these died in faith, not having received the promise

(fulfillment), God having reserved some better thing for us, that they without us should not be made perfect." – Hebrew 11:39,40.

The "*better thing for us*" is the spiritual part of the great Abrahamic promise. We are invited to become members of the spiritual Seed of Abraham – the Christ, the Messiah, Prophet, Priest, Mediator, King, of which our Redeemer, our Lord, is Head. The work of this spiritual Seed as King and Mediator of the New Covenant between God and the world will progress throughout the Millennial Age. Divine favor was cut off from the natural seed of Abraham during the past eighteen centuries and bestowed upon the spiritual Seed selected from both Jews and Gentiles.

But as soon as the spiritual Seed, "the Elect," shall be completed, the blessing of the Lord shall proceed from and through the spiritual Seed to the natural seed, eventually fulfilling God's promises of an earthly kind so long deferred to Israel. Notice how distinctly St. Paul outlines all this in Romans 11:25-32.

Thus seen, John's mission was to arouse the people of Israel to the fact that Messiah had come, that the time of the inauguration of the long-promised Kingdom of God was at hand, and that if they, as a people, desired to share in it, in harmony with their long-cherished hopes, they should at once begin preparation. Not as a whole would the favored nation be accepted, but as individuals. All, therefore, should make a searching of their hearts, and if they found evil therein, if they have been living in known violation of the Law, they should repent and turn from the sin, and they should symbolize their reformation in the presence of witnesses by a baptism which symbolically represented this putting away of sin. [R4543 : page 8]

God chose a strong, rugged character to bear this message. Providentially John's experiences in the wilderness specially qualified him; and his peculiar raiment and food enabled him to be independent of all religious sects and parties amongst the Jews and gave him freedom of utterance, which he might not otherwise have had. At the same time these peculiarities made his message all the more striking to the minds of the people.

As an illustration of his boldness, he challenged some of the prominent religionists of his time, who came to his preaching and baptism. He declared that they were the offspring of vipers and that their repentance would not be considered genuine without certain proofs, and that they might rid themselves of the delusion that they could inherit any share in the Kingdom merely because they were the natural children of Abraham, since God was able to fulfil his promise to Abraham along other lines.

John's declaration that now the axe was laid at the roots of the trees and that all not bringing forth good fruit would be hewn down and cast into the fire, was merely a figurative way of saying that the testing time for the Jewish people had come, that it was an individual matter, and that only such as bore good fruit in their characters and lives would any longer be recognized of the Lord as Israelites and identified with the Kingdom. All the remainder, cut off from those privileges, would go into the fire of tribulation and destruction with which their national existence would cease.

He was faithful in telling his hearers that his work and his baptism were merely preparatory; that the greater teachings and the higher baptism Messiah would institute. The honor and dignity of Messiah were so great that in comparison he was not worthy to be his most menial servant to carry his shoes. Messiah's baptism would be of two parts, the one upon the faithful, the other upon the unfaithful. "Israelites indeed" he

would baptize with the holy Spirit and subsequently the unworthy, the non-fruitbearing, would experience a baptism of fire, of trouble, of national destruction.

Again he illustrated the character of Messiah's work in their nation, comparing it to the winnowing of wheat from chaff.

The entire mass, the entire nation, would be tossed about by the great winnower, in order that every grain of wheat might be found and separated from the chaff. The wheat was cared for, garnered, to a new state or condition at Pentecost and subsequently. The chaff of the nation was cast into a fire of trouble, insurrection and anarchy, which consumed them as people, as a nation, A.D. 70. That fire was unquenchable in the sense that it was the Divine intention that the nation should be consumed and it was not in the power of the ablest of statesmen and rulers to prevent this – to quench the fire. It burned itself out, as stated.

St. Paul calls attention to this matter saying, "Wrath is upon this people unto the uttermost," that all things written in the Law and the prophets concerning them should have fulfillment. Space does not permit our rehearsing here what we have already presented at length in the SCRIPTURE STUDIES, Series II, Study VIII, respecting the fact that John the Baptizer, as forerunner of Jesus, Jesus' representative to the Jews, was but a partial fulfillment of the type of Elijah. As many of our readers have the SCRIPTURE STUDIES in their libraries, we commend to them this most interesting feature, which is closely related to to-day's study. An antitypical Elijah is there shown, composed of Jesus in the flesh and his followers in the flesh, who must do a preparatory work in the world, in introduction of the Messiah of glory, Jesus the Head, and the Church his Body.

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