

“A PEOPLE PREPARED FOR THE LORD”
NO. 2404

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DELIVERED BY C. H. SPURGEON,
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“To make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”
Luke 1:17.

JOHN was the herald of Christ—he was to prepare the way for the coming King—but from this text it appears that he was to do more than that. He was not only to make the road ready for the Lord, but he was also “to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.” That was a great work, a task in which he would require strength and wisdom greater than his own. He would need that the Spirit of God, who was to be given without measure to the coming One, should also be, in a measure, within himself, if he should really “make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”

This is not at all a usual expression. At first sight, it hardly looks to us like a Gospel expression. We sang just now—

*“Just as I am—and waiting not
To rid my soul of one dark blot,
To You, whose blood can cleanse each spot,
O Lamb of God, I come.”*

We sang over and over again those words, “Just as I am,” “Just as I am,” and we are prone to protest against the idea of being *prepared* for Christ. We constantly preach that no preparation is needed, but that men are to come to Jesus just as they are. Yet here is John the Baptist set apart, “to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”

The fact is, dear Friends, that to get men to come to Jesus just as they are is not an easy thing. To get them to give up the idea of preparing, to get them prepared to come without preparing, to get them ready to come just as they are—this is the hardest part of our work—this is our greatest difficulty. If we came and preached to men the necessity of preparation through so many weeks of fasting during a long Lent, or through so many days of scourging and penitence, they would attend to us at once, for they would be willing enough to make any preparation of that kind! But, when we say to them, “Come just as you are, with nothing in your hands to buy the mercy of God, with nothing wherewith to demand or to deserve it,” men want a great deal of preparing before they will come to that point! Only the Grace of God, working mightily through the Word, by the Spirit, will prepare men to come to Christ—prepared by being unprepared so far as any fitness of their own is concerned. The only fit state in which they can come is that of sinking themselves, abandoning all idea of helping Christ, coming in all their natural impotence and guilt and taking Christ to be their All in All.

Beloved Friends, this is the true preparedness of heart for coming to Christ—the preparedness of coming to Him just as you are! And it was John’s business, thus, “to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.” That is also my business at this time. May the good Spirit, who dwelt in John the Baptist, work through us, also, that some here may be made ready for Christ—“a people prepared for the Lord”! Let us see how John carried out his commission. We shall then be better able to understand the text.

I. First, John made ready “a people prepared for the Lord” BY AWAKENING THEIR ATTENTION.

The people were asleep—they had fallen into a condition of religious lethargy, when suddenly there stood in their midst a man clothed in camel’s hair and with a leather girdle about his loins—a Prophet, manifestly, by the boldness and truthfulness of his utterances. He spoke in such a way that the people in general heard of his speaking and they advertised him by saying, the one to the other, “That is a strange man who has begun to preach by the River Jordan and whose meat is locusts and wild honey.”

The whole style of the man set the people wondering and talking. And when they came to listen to him, he did not flatter them! He did not utter mere commonplace truths to them, but with burning earnestness he drove straight at their

hearts and spoke like Elijah, the great Prophet of fire, had done in the ages gone by. *So he set them thinking.* That is a great preparation for coming to Christ just as you are, to be set a-thinking! We have always hope of men when they once begin to think about religion and the things of God. See how the bulk of them hurry on with their eyes tightly shut, rushing fast and yet faster, still, down to destruction! You cannot make them stop and think. There are thousands of men who would almost sooner be whipped than be made to think. The last thing to which they will ever come, of themselves, is thoughtfulness!

Let me appeal to some here who are still unconverted. Did you ever give the affairs of your soul the benefit of an hour's serious consideration? You have your regular time for stocktaking, those of you who are in business—do you ever take stock of your *spiritual* estate? I know that you are not such fools as to neglect your ledgers, you cast up your accounts to see where you are, financially, but do you cast up the account between God and your own soul, and look the matter fairly and squarely in the face? Oh, if we could but bring you to do this, we would feel that you were being prepared for coming to Christ just as you are, for no man will come to Christ while he is utterly careless and thoughtless! Faith is a matter of thought—it requires a mind awakened from slumber, a mind that has taken wing—and John the Baptist did good service for his Master when he startled men into that condition and so made them consider their ways.

He did more than that, for, having first made them think, *he preached to them a Savior.* He told them that One was coming with power to baptize them after a higher sort than his baptism. He cried, “Behold the Lamb of God, which takes away the sin of the world,” and this message infused into the people a measure of hope. The poor people said, “What shall we do?” for they had a hope that there was something to be gained. Even the tax-gatherers, despised as they were, began to look up and think that there might be something, even, for them, so they said to John, “Master, what shall we do?” And the rough Roman soldiers thought, “There may be something for us,” so they, also, asked, “And what shall *we* do?” John inspired the multitudes with hope.

It is a very blessed state of mind for a man to get in when he begins to hope that he may be saved. Then he will be prepared to come to Jesus, just as he is, when he feels that he is not shut up to despair. “Oh,” says the poor man, “I need not, after all, be lost! I need not abide forever under the wrath of God! There is an open door set before me, there is a way of mercy, even for me!” I wish it were possible that everybody whom I am now addressing had that feeling—it would be part of the making ready of “a people prepared for the Lord” when thought had blossomed into hope.

But John led his hearers on further than that, for *they began to expect something as well as to hope for it.* They expected that the Christ would speedily come and they expected some great blessings through the coming of the Messiah. And oh, when men, after hearing the Gospel, have great expectations concerning God and His salvation, surely their expectations will not be long disappointed! I remember a man coming, one day, to see me. He said that he wished to take a sitting in the Tabernacle. He had been hearing me for some time and he wanted to take a seat—but he desired to be very honest with me and not to take a seat except upon a right understanding. I asked, “What is the difficulty, my Friend?” “Well,” he replied, “the person who sat next to me on Sunday told me that if I became a regular hearer here, you would expect me to be converted.” “Well,” I answered, “that is true, I shall expect it.” “But,” he said, “you do not mean that you will *require* it of me.” “Oh, dear no!” I replied, “nothing of the sort. I do not expect you to convert *yourself*, but I hope and trust that you will be converted—that is what I mean. I shall expect that God, in His Grace, will meet with you and save you.”

“Oh,” he said, “I hope that, too! Only I mean that I could not guarantee it.” “Ah,” I said, “I see that you have taken the word, ‘expect,’ in the wrong sense, but I think, dear Friend, that if you come *expecting* to be converted, and I preach expecting that *you will be converted*, it is highly probable that it will soon take place.” “Oh,” he exclaimed, “God grant it!” The good Brother has long since gone to Heaven. A very few weeks after our conversation, he came and told me that the expectation in which we had united had been fulfilled and he trusted that he had found the Savior. When people come really *expecting* a blessing, they will be sure to get it! I believe that some folk go to hear ministers with the idea that there will be something to find fault with and, of course, they find that it is so. And when people come to hear another preacher, with the hope and expectation that God will bless them, of course God *does* bless them. Their expectation is Divinely fulfilled! I always have a bright hope that a man will lay hold on Christ when he begins to expect to be saved, for he feels, then, that the time has come for him to find eternal life. John made ready “a people prepared for the Lord” be-

cause, first, he led them to *thought*. Next, he led them to *hope*, and then he led them to *expectation*—and this is a high measure of preparation!

John did more than this, for he cried, “Repent you: for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand,” that is to say, *he put a pressure of urgency upon the people*. A Brother, who is an eminent preacher, but who uses rather long words, was explaining to me the benefit of the preaching of Mr. Fullerton and Mr. Smith in his place of worship. He said, “I do not know exactly why these Brothers were the means of the conversion of many in my place whom I had never reached, but I perceived that they had the power to precipitate decision.” It sounded rather strange, but when I thought it over a little while, I rather liked the expression, “the power to precipitate decision.” That is the power that leads men to make up their minds and say, “Yes,” or, “No”—to feel that the decision has to be made at once and that the putting of it off is impossible because it would be a kind of insanity! Now that is the meaning of what John said, “The Kingdom of Heaven is at hand! Repent you! He is coming who wields the axe of Divine Justice—bear fruit, or else be cut down! He is coming who uses the great winnowing fan—be the true wheat, or else be blown away.” He put the Truth of God so pointedly and so earnestly, that he did, by that means, make ready “a people prepared for the Lord.”

II. Now, secondly, John made the people ready for CHRIST BY AWAKENING THEIR CONSCIENCES.

His very first utterance, as I have reminded you, was, “Repent you, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand.” “Repent! Repent! Repent!” was John’s continual cry. This awakened the consciences of his hearers concerning *their sin*. Preaching repentance meant, “You have sinned! Change your mind in reference to that sin you have sinned—quit the sin, mourn over it, ask forgiveness for it. Repent!” Whenever a man brings to the minds of others their sins—when he does it so that they begin to feel that they *have sinned*—then they are being prepared for the Lord, for no man will come to the Savior unless he knows that he *needs a Savior*. And no man will feel that he needs a Savior until he feels that he is a sinner. Hence it is a real preparation of men for Christ to convince them of sin.

This John did. He brought their sin before them and then *he showed them their need of cleansing*, for he stood by the River Jordan, not with a scallop shell, as some depict him, but he stood by the flowing stream ready to immerse all those who repented! This was practically saying to them, “You need to be washed, you need to be cleansed, and I show you this Truth of God as I baptize you with water unto repentance. Be this a token to you that there is no entering Heaven in your filthiness, but you must first be washed! As your bodies are washed with pure water, so must your souls be washed and made clean before you can enter Heaven.” This was John’s plain teaching by his action as well as by his words.

Then he went very straight to his point of awakening their consciences by telling them *of their need of a change of life*. He said that it was no use for them to pretend to grieve over the past and then continue to sin in the same fashion. “Bring forth fruits,” he said, “meet for repentance,” or, “answerable to amendment of life,” as the margin has it. And he took pains to point out what the fruits must be. If they were men of greed, they must become generous and give to their needy neighbors. If they had been unrighteous and exacting, they must become honest. If they had been domineering and brutal, and murmuring, they must become contented and quiet, and gentle.

He not only preached to the multitudes about repentance of sin in general, *but he pointed out the precise sin of each class of persons* that came to him and urged them to perform the special duties which they had neglected. Now, Brothers and Sisters, I believe, as I have often said, that there is no sewing with silk thread, alone—you must have a *needle* as well! You need a sharp needle to, first, draw the thread through the material. And so you must preach the Law. You must denounce sin and you must individualize and condemn special sins. And you must be personal and pointed, or else men will not feel in their *consciences* what you say to them. Conscience is very apt to get seared as with a hot iron—to lose sensitiveness—so as to be no use at all as a conscience. Some say that conscience is a spark of deity, a divine monitor—it is nothing of the sort! In many a man it is almost extinct, for it does not act at all! The preacher who would “make ready a people prepared for the Lord” must come out with his axe and lay it to the root of the trees! He must be definite and distinct in indicating this sin and that sin, and crying to all men, “Repent of these sins! Give them up! Get clear from them! Be washed from them or else, as God lives, when the Christ, Himself, comes, it will *not* be to *save* you, but to blow you away with His winnowing fan as the chaff is blown into the fire!”

This is “to make ready a people prepared for the Lord”—by their being convinced of sin and led to repentance. That, I think, is a second meaning clearly illustrated in the ministry of John the Baptist.

III. But thirdly, John had “to make ready a people prepared for the Lord” BY POINTING OUT THE NATURE OF TRUE RELIGION.

He showed that *it did not depend upon external privileges*. As soon as John began to preach, the men of Jewish race, proud of their pedigree, pressed near, and John, with all the courage that a servant of the Lord could have, said, “Begin not to say within yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father,’ for I say unto you, that God is able of these stones to raise up children unto Abraham.” You see the drift of his preaching, do you not? He says, practically, “Men and women, there is no virtue in your boasted privileges. There is no merit in your religious descent. As for supposing yourselves to be the peculiar people of God, you are not to be saved that way. Say not, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’” Oh, how many hug that idea, “My father was a Christian.” Others say, “Well, I live in a Christian country.” They suppose that there is something in the very race from which they have sprung! Away with all such notions, for whatever external privileges you may have had, they are not sufficient to secure salvation for you!

Then came the Pharisees and the Sadducees. They were the religious people of the time, the great observers of all outward propriety, but John taught them that *true religion is not the same as official pretension*. He called them a “generation of vipers.” This was very disrespectful and very shocking, indeed, on his part! All the newspapers of the period, if there had been any, would have cried him down for his lack of charity, but he wanted those who came to him to understand that true religion was not the same as professing to be religious! It was not making broad the borders of their garments. It was not wearing a text of Scripture as a phylactery between their eyes. It was not making long prayers at the corners of the streets that would save them—there must be a thorough change of heart! So John spoke right straight out and this, I believe, is a great way of preparing men for coming to Christ, when you tell them, “It is not your early training, it is not your going to Church or Chapel, it is not your infant sprinkling and your confirmation! It is not even your *adult* Baptism, nor your saying prayers and reading the Bible that will save you—‘you must be born again.’ There must be an inward spiritual change worked by the Holy Spirit! You must believe in Jesus Christ, whom God has sent, and you must so believe in Him as to be made new creatures in Him or else you cannot be saved.” Now, when men realize that all this is true, it startles them out of their false refuges and makes them ready to flee to the only true Refuge, so that it is really the way of making ready “a people prepared for the Lord.”

While John set forth this matter negatively, putting down all the wrong hopes of his hearers, he was exceedingly plain in telling them that the way of salvation would involve them in *the necessity of being right before God*. “There,” he said, “the proof of a tree’s life is its fruit and the evidence of your new life will be your good works. ‘Now also the axe is laid unto the root of the trees and, therefore, every tree which brings not forth good fruit is hewn down and cast into the fire.’ Unless our religion makes us holy, it has not done anything for us that is really worth doing! Unless we hate sin and love righteousness, our religion is a sham and a lie! John stated that Truth of God very plainly—and that is the way to drive men to Christ.

He also told them that the trial of a life would be by its weight as well as by its fruit. “Look,” he said, “at the heap that lies on the threshing floor. He that has the fan in his hand begins to winnow it. That which is light and chaffy is blown away. That which has wheat in it remains on the floor. So,” he said, “there must be weight about your religion—stability, reality, sincerity. There must be heart-work in it. It must be no pretense. It must be true from beginning to end or else it shall be no more use to you than a heap of chaff would avail the farmer when it is blown into the fire.”

Then John taught his hearers that Christ, Himself, would be the great Trier of human hearts—not ministers or fellow professors, but Christ, Himself. When men feel this to be true, then they begin to say to themselves, “There is more required than we, at present, possess. There is more demanded than we can ever manufacture of ourselves. Let us go to Him that has it and ask Him for it. Let us go to Christ, who has Grace to bestow upon the poor and needy.” This, then, is the way to make ready “a people prepared for the Lord,” by pointing out to them the nature of true religion. That is what I have tried to do, dear Hearer. When you know that you cannot save yourself, you sing—

*“Not the labors of my hands
Can fulfill Your Law’s demands.
Could my zeal no respite know,
Could my tears forever flow,
All for sin could not atone.”*

And then you are ready to finish the verse by singing—

“You must save, and You, alone.”

IV. Now, I shall close my discourse by noticing a fourth way in which John made ready “a people prepared for the Lord.” He did it BY DECLARING THE GRACE AND POWER OF JESUS CHRIST.

My Brothers and Sisters, if I were to preach to you merely to awaken your attention, to awaken your consciences to a sense of sin, or simply to show you the nature of true religion, yet you would not be prepared for Christ unless you also knew something about Him, something about His suitableness and His power to save you. So, *John preached Jesus Christ as a mighty and glorious Savior on whom the Spirit rested.* He said, when he baptized our Lord, as Jesus came up out of the water, “I saw the Spirit descending from Heaven like a dove and it abode upon Him. And I knew Him not, but He that sent me to baptize with water, the Same said unto me, Upon whom you shall see the Spirit descending, and remaining on Him, the same is He which baptizes with the Holy Spirit.” John boldly preached and told the people that the Spirit of God rested upon Jesus Christ, yes, abode upon Him!

Now, this would lead them to Him, and this should lead *you* to Him. Whatever there is, poor Souls, that you need to make you holy and perfect, Christ has it, for the Spirit of God rests on Him and abides in Him without measure! If you need the Grace of penitence, Christ has it to give to you. If you need the Grace of supplication, He has it to give to you. If you need the Grace of faith, He has it! If you need the Grace of holiness, He has it. “It pleased the Father that in Him should all fullness dwell.” “And of His fullness have all we received, and Grace for Grace.” John taught this to his hearers and I teach it to you. There is nothing needed between Hell and Heaven but what is in Christ! Nothing needed for the biggest sinner out of Hell to make him the biggest saint in Heaven but what Christ has! Nothing needed in any hour of temptation, in any time of depression—nothing needed in any moment of sickness, or in the article of death, itself—but what it is in Christ and, there for you, if you trust Him! If you are willing to have it, it is freely presented to you. He who makes you willing to receive, is certainly willing to give! If He has emptied you and prepared you to receive of His fullness, do not think that He will refuse you when you come to Him for it! He has said, “Him that comes to Me, I will in no wise cast out.”

Last Sunday morning, I blew the great trumpet in the hope of startling some to Christ [Sermon #1951, Volume 33—*The Pleading of the Last Messenger*—Read/download entire sermon at <http://www.spurgeongems.org>.] On this occasion, I would ring the little silver bell with a gentle noise in the hope that some may, by that means, be made willing to come to Christ! My Hearer, you can need nothing which Christ does not possess—all your requirements are fully met in Him. The Spirit of God dwells in Him as a fullness—as an abiding fullness—therefore, do but believe in Him! And even that faith He will give you! Do but trust Him and you are saved, and fully supplied in Him who can meet all the necessities of your case.

Now, Brothers and Sisters, John taught the people this that they might be ready for Christ—“a people prepared for the Lord”—for, when men begin to see what a Christ, Christ is, what a Savior the Savior is, then they are ready to come to Him! And I pray that many of you may so come to Him even now.

John also told his hearers that *the Christ whom he preached was able to baptize them with the Holy Spirit.* “See,” he says, “I only plunge you in the flowing stream. I can do nothing more for you than dip you in this River Jordan, on profession of your repentance of sin. But this Savior, this Christ of God, can immerse you into the Spirit of God! He can give you of His power to fill you—you can be baptized into the Holy Spirit by Him.” Do you hear this, Sinner? Jesus Christ can come and give you the Holy Spirit in such measure that you shall be baptized into Him—

***“Plunged in the Godhead’s deepest sea,
And lost in His immensity.”***

This will make you to be really His and make you truly to live unto Him. The very fullness of Grace, then, is with Christ, and He is prepared *to give it*—and this should make men prepared *to receive it*! Did not the poor prodigal son say of the provision in his father’s house, “There is bread enough and to spare”? It was partly *that* which made him go to his father’s house and we may say of the Spirit who is in Christ, “There is enough and to spare for every poor sinner who comes to Him”—therefore, come along with you—be prepared at once to come and receive the Savior!

Lastly, John said in his preaching, “Behold the Lamb of God which takes away the sin of the world.” *He pointed out Christ as the Sin-Bearer*, bearing human guilt in His own Person. That is the master key which lets men into the Kingdom of Heaven. Oh, how I delight to preach Christ as the Substitute, Christ as the atoning Sacrifice! And when you have heard Christ preached in that way, it makes you ready—“a people prepared for the Lord.” How can men come to Christ

if they do not know what Christ has done for them? If you do not understand that He suffered in your place, the Just for the unjust, to bring you to God, how can you come to Christ? But when you have learned that holy and blessed doctrine of Christ’s Propitiation for human sin, why, then, I think you will leap at the very sound of it and say, “Yes, I will take this Propitiation to be a Sacrifice for me! Blessed Lamb of God—

*‘My faith would lay her hands
On that dear head of Yours
While like a penitent I stand
And there confess my sin.’”*

John’s preaching Christ was the best way of making ready “a people prepared for the Lord,” and there is no better way of preparing you to come to Jesus. Oh, that God would grant to some of you that “precipitation of decision” of which my learned friend spoke! Oh, that in some lives the turning point might be reached *tonight*—the happy moment when they should decide for Christ! Lord, decide them! My Friend, you have come to the crossroads—perhaps, tonight—if you reject the Savior, it will be your last rejection of Him and it will finally seal your doom! And I am sure, with no perhaps whatever, that if this night you look to Jesus and trust to His finished work, you shall be saved and saved forever!

Here is a text for you—“Whoever shall call on the name of the Lord shall be saved.” Is not that a wonderful “whoever”? “Whoever shall call on the name of the Lord” in believing prayer, asking mercy, trusting Christ for mercy, “shall be saved.” “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you shall be saved.” “He that believes on the Son has everlasting life.” Most of you know these texts by heart—grip them as with hooks of steel! If you say that you are hungry and I put a loaf of bread in front of you, will you sit and look at it all night? If I meet you in a week’s time, will you still complain that you are hungry while there is the bread, in front of you, still untouched? You deserve to be hungry if that is the case! You deserve to be famished to death if the bread, being there, you do not take it. Take it and eat it. “May I have it?” asks one. Well, you are *commanded* to have it—this is not a matter that is left to your option! “The times of this ignorance God winked at, but now commands all men everywhere to repent.” Our Lord, Himself, said, “Repent, you, and believe the Gospel.” It is, therefore, a Gospel *command* that you should repent and believe—and truly you may obey a command given by the Lord, Himself! There is no question about your permission to obey it—obey it at once and take Christ to yourself!

“You do not know me,” says a sorrowing one over there in the corner, “you do not know me, Sir. Otherwise you would not talk so.” I do not need to know you, but if you were the devil’s own, if you would but come to Christ, you would be, at once and forever, Christ’s own! Though you were sunk almost into Hell by a life of horrible crime, yet if you will *now come and repent of your sin and lay hold on Christ*, you shall be saved! I do not know how to use language that shall be stronger than that, but do not think that I will withdraw it, or qualify it. If I did know how to speak in broader terms, even, than those I have used, I would so speak! You guiltiest of the guilty, you most condemned of all the condemned, for whom the hottest Hell would be your due place, yet come and look to Christ, and you shall live, for *none* are too vile for Him to cleanse, *none* are too guilty for Him to pardon! Oh, that you would believe in Jesus while yet the Gospel bell rings out, “mercy, mercy, mercy!” God help you to do so, for the Lord Jesus Christ’s sake! Amen.

EXPOSITION BY C. H. SPURGEON:

LUKE 1:5-17, 3:1-18.

Luke 1:5, 6. *There was in the days of Herod, the king of Judea, a certain priest named Zacharias, of the division of Abia; and his wife was of the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. And they were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord, blameless.* You have, here, a very interesting couple, Zacharias and Elizabeth—a priest with a wife. I have often marveled why the Church of Rome thinks it wrong that priests should be married when it is evident that the priests under the Law were so. The priests had grown so numerous that there was not room for them all to work at the Temple at one time. They were divided into 24 divisions and Zacharias would, therefore, come up to Jerusalem for a fortnight to take his share of the service. Zacharias and Elizabeth were notable for excellence of character—“They were both righteous before God.” Not only did they stand high in the esteem of men, but the great God who reads the hearts of all and sees how they live in secret, reckoned them to be righteous—

“They were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments”—that is, in the moral precepts of the Law—“and ordinances”—that is in the ceremonial rites—“of the Lord, blameless.”

7-9. *And they had no child because Elizabeth was barren, and they both were now well advanced in years. And it came to pass that while he executed the priest’s office before God in the order of his division, according to the custom of the priest’s office, his lot was to burn incense when he went into the Temple of the Lord.* Certain offices of the priest were considered to be more honorable than others and so, to prevent any jealousy, they cast lots as to which they should take in turn. It fell to the lot of Zacharias to burn incense—this did not happen by chance. “The lot is cast into the lap; but the whole disposing thereof is of the Lord,” and there was a special reason why this good man should stand at the altar at this particular time.

10. *And the whole multitude of the people were praying outside at the time of incense.* While he, in the inner shrine, was burning incense, the multitudes in the outer courts were engaging in prayer. I think that is a very beautiful symbol—the priest unseen, like the Lord Jesus Christ in the Holy of Holies above—and the mass of the people engaged in prayer while the unseen priest is offering the sacred perfume before the altar of Jehovah.

11, 12. *And there appeared unto him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense. And when Zacharias saw him, he was troubled, and fear fell upon him.* He was a good man, yet he was troubled at the sight of an angel. Consciousness of sin, even in an outwardly blameless man, makes us all tremble in the presence of anything heavenly. This bright spirit had come fresh from the courts of God. He was a courtier of the heavenly Temple and he had come down, all of a sudden, with a sweet and cheering message for the earthly priest. But the priest “was troubled, and fear fell upon him.” Brothers and Sisters, we cannot know much of Heaven, here below, because it would cause us to tremble. We are as yet unfit for all the glories of that upper state. Good John Berridge wrote—

*“And now they range the heavenly plains
And sing their hymns in melting strains.
And now their souls begin to prove
The heights and depths of Jesus’ love.
Ah, Lord, with tardy steps I creep
And sometimes sing, and sometimes weep!
Yet strip me of this house of clay
And I will sing as loud as they.”*

Yes, and so will we—we will be as much at home as the happy saints who dwell in light—when once we are delivered from this hampering flesh and blood!

13. *But the angel said unto him, Fear not, Zacharias, for your prayer is heard.* The best quietus to fear is answered prayer! If God has heard you, be not you, again, afraid.

13. *And your wife Elizabeth shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name, John.* “The Grace” or, “the gift of God,” so the name, “John,” signifies. And it is a sweet name for anyone to bear. “You shall call his name, John.” I do not think the prayer alluded to here was so much a prayer for a son. If so, I think that Zacharias had long ago left off praying it, and now his old prayers are heard, after he had discontinued them. I think that it alludes, rather, to his prayer for the coming of the Christ, the appearance of the Messiah—that prayer was heard, as we shall see further on.

14, 15. *And you shall have joy and gladness; and many shall rejoice at his birth. For he shall be great in the sight of the Lord, and shall drink neither wine nor strong drink.* I do not say that it is the duty of every man to drink neither wine nor strong drink, but I beg every man to notice that if anyone was to be peculiarly consecrated to a holy calling, it was always to be so. “He shall be great in the sight of the Lord, and shall drink neither wine nor strong drink.” If there is nothing defiling about wine or strong drink, there is certainly nothing sanctifying about it—and the tendency seems to lie the other way, else it is a strange thing that men dedicated to God were so continually bid to drink neither wine nor strong drink.

15-17. *And he shall be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother’s womb. And many of the children of Israel shall he turn to the Lord, their God. And he shall go before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just; to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.* In the third chapter of this Gospel you will find the record of John beginning to fulfill this prophecy concerning himself.

Luke 3:1-7. *Now in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, and Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and of the region of Trachonitis, and Lysanias the tetrarch of Abilene, while Annas and Caiaphas were high priests, the word of God came unto John, the son of Zacharias, in the wilderness. And he came into all the country about Jordan, preaching the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins; as it is written in the Book of the words of Isaiah the Prophet, saying, The voice of one crying in the wilderness, Prepare you the way of the Lord, make His paths straight. Every valley shall be filled and every mountain and hill shall be brought low; and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways shall be made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God. Then said he to the multitude that came forth to be baptized of him, O generation of vipers, who has warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Does not John the Baptist speak like Elijah? Here are no honeyed phrases to delight the popular ear! The Prophet of the wilderness talks like one who is all on fire with zeal for God and indignation against evil.*

8-11. *Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance, and begin not to say within yourselves, We have Abraham as our father: for I say unto you, That God is able of these stones to raise up children unto Abraham. And now also the axe is laid unto the root of the trees: every tree, therefore, which brings not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire. And the people asked him, saying, What shall we do, then? He answered and said to them, He that has two coats, let him impart to him that has none; and he that has meat, let him do likewise. John was wonderfully practical in his advocacy of a holy charity and benevolence. His words cut against all greed, all hoarding, all hardening of the heart towards our fellow men.*

12, 13. *Then came also publicans to be baptized, and said unto him, Master, what shall we do? And he said unto them, Exact no more than that which is appointed you. They were accustomed to gather the taxes unfairly and to increase the rates by oppressing the people, getting, perhaps, twice or even ten times more out of them than they could legally claim! John speaks to the point, does he not?*

14. *And the soldiers, likewise, demanded of him, saying, And what shall we do? And he said unto them, Do violence to no man. Those rough Roman soldiers, as they had conquered the country, were very apt to treat the people as though they were their slaves, so John says to them, “Do violence to no man”—*

14. *Neither accuse any falsely; and be content with your wages. “With your rations, your allowances,” so it runs. They were very apt to be contending for an increase in their pay and to drag civilians before the courts with false accusations unless they chose to give them bribes to let them go. John does not mince matters with any of his hearers—he speaks with wonderful plainness and courage—and therein proves himself to be a true herald of his Master.*

15-18. *And as the people were in expectation, and all men mused in their hearts of John, whether he were the Christ, or not, John answered, saying unto them all, I, indeed, baptize you with water; but One mightier than I comes, the laces of whose shoes I am not worthy to unloosen. He shall baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire: whose fan is in His hand, and He will thoroughly purge His floor and will gather the wheat into His garner; but the chaff He will burn with fire unquenchable. And many other things in his exhortation preached he unto the people.*

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