

Chapter 1 John

A Voice in the Wilderness

The New Testament has its real beginning with John the Baptist, the forerunner of the Messiah and one of the greatest characters of all time. We read: "In those days came John the Baptist, preaching in the wilderness of Judea, and saying, Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand. For this is He that was spoken of by the prophet Esaias, saying, The voice of one crying in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make His paths straight." Matthew 3:1-3.

This is the substance of John's message and is the first recorded appeal and warning in the New Testament. It is also the summary of the preaching of Jesus: "From that time Jesus began to preach, and to say, Repent: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." Matthew 4:17. It is really the keynote of the gospel in all ages, and especially in our own day when the second coming of Christ and the kingdom of glory are at hand.

The importance of studying the character and work of John the Baptist is emphasized by the fact that he was the divinely appointed herald of the first advent of the Messiah and was therefore a type of the messengers who are announcing to the world His second advent. The subject should therefore be of special interest to us. In order to proclaim a message, that will make a people ready for the second coming of our Lord, we must have an experience and develop a character after the likeness of him who announced His first advent.

Let us notice some of the characteristics of John and his message which have been recorded especially "for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the world are come." We will consider some of the striking parallels between the messengers and the messages in both type and antitype. Like the prophet Jeremiah, John was chosen, ordained, and divinely commissioned before his birth. His father, Zacharias, was a priest, and his mother, Elisabeth, was a descendant of Aaron. It was considered a double distinction and honor for a priest to marry the daughter of a priest.

Of the parents of John we read: "There was in the days of Herod, the king of Judea, a certain priest named Zacharias, of the course of Abia: and his wife was of the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elisabeth. And they were both righteous before God, walking in all the

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commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless.” Luke 1:5, 6. What a wonderful spiritual heritage was that of John! He was a child of their old age and was born in answer to earnest prayer. How different things would be if all children were wanted and prayed for! John’s heritage was that of faith, righteousness, and unquestioning obedience. He could therefore say with the psalmist, “The lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; yea, I have a goodly heritage.” Psalm 16:6, R.S.V. This is a spiritual advantage to any child, and parents should see that their children are not deprived of it. John was a priest, a prophet, and, like Noah, “a preacher of righteousness.”

The typical priestly services were divided into twenty-four courses, of which Abia was the eighth. Each course served eight days, from Sabbath to Sabbath, twice a year. Lots were cast to determine which of the many priests in the course would perform special duties. To perform some of these was a privilege which might come to a priest only once in a lifetime. On this occasion the lot fell on Zacharias. “It was the great moment of Zacharias’s life, and his heart was no doubt alert for the supernatural.”-Ragg. While he was serving “at the time of incense,” the angel Gabriel appeared “on the right side of the altar of incense.” M. R. Vincent thus describes the scene: “Ascending the steps to the holy place, the priests spread the coals on the golden altar, and arranged the incense, and the chief officiating priest was left alone within the holy place to await the signal of the president to burn the incense. It was probably at this time that the angel appeared.”

“The whole multitude of the people were praying without” the holy place in the courts at the time of the morning or evening sacrifice, or prayer, while Zacharias was ministering within. Luke 1:7-13. Zacharias had been praying for a son, and doubtless also for the coming of the Messiah, and both prayers were to be answered. Zacharias means “Remembered by Jehovah,” and he was divinely remembered in a wonderful way. John means “The Lord is gracious,” an appropriate name divinely given. He was born of God and sent to herald His grace. He was designated “John the Baptist” to distinguish him from the many other Johns and to describe his work. This was a common custom among the Jews. “James the Less” and “Simon the Zealot” further illustrate this scriptural practice.

The character and work of John were foretold by the angel: “And thou shalt 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; and he shall be filled with the Holy Ghost, even

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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 Elias, 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." Luke 1:14-17.

John was small in his own estimation as well as that of men, but "great in the sight of the Lord," who "seeth not as man seeth; for man looketh on the outward appearance, but the Lord looketh on the heart." How different are the viewpoints of man and of God! Many of the truly great, who have lived and died unrecognized, occupying unknown and unmarked graves, will receive their rewards in the life to come. Smallness or greatness of character are determined by our attitude toward God's law, which is a transcript of His character. Jesus said: "Whosoever therefore shall break one of these least commandments, and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven: but whosoever shall do and teach them, the same shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven." Matthew 5:19.

John's life was characterized by temperance and self-control in all things. "No wine or fermented drink shall he ever drink," is the Weymouth translation, third edition. Instead of being filled with "strong drink," he was "filled with the Holy Spirit." The inference is that only temperate people are great in the sight of God and can be filled with His Spirit. This was true on the Day of Pentecost, and will also be true of those who experience the final outpouring of the Holy Spirit in the latter rain when Pentecost will be repeated. The antitype of John's message is being given to the world by a people who "drink neither wine nor strong drink," the most temperate people in the world in an age when the drinking of alcoholic liquors is almost universal.

The angel predicted that under John's ministry there would be a movement back to God and His word, from which Israel had largely departed. The whole nation was in a backslidden state, a deplorable spiritual condition. Modern Israel likewise is in desperate need of a great spiritual revival and reformation to deliver them from their Laodicean lukewarmness in affection for God and man. This revival and reformation is the greatest and most urgent of all our needs, and demands our undivided attention. On it depends the eternal destiny of the modern church.

John was not Elijah in person, but he was to preach a message, "in the spirit and power" of that ancient reformer, who has been called the Martin Luther of ancient Israel. John was not to manifest the miracle-

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working power of Elijah, for “John did no miracle.” Does this infer that the performing of miracles will not be prominent in the message that heralds the second advent of Christ? Perhaps so, for then we are told that Satan will work “with all power and signs and lying wonders” to deceive if possible the very elect. Therefore as evidence of the truth and true religion, miracles would accomplish but little, if anything.

John’s message, like that of Elijah, brought conviction, conversion, and reformation, a turning to the Lord. Weymouth said that he would “cause the rebellious to walk in the wisdom of the upright, to make a people perfectly ready for the Lord.” And that is the mission of those who proclaim the second-advent message, to make a people, not partly ready, but perfectly ready, to meet our returning Lord. All else is secondary in importance to that supreme purpose without which everything fails.

The mention of a reformation in the home is clearly a reference to Malachi 4:5, 6. This scripture has a double application, first to the work of John the Baptist, and secondly to the heralds of the second advent. This is indicated by the statement that the prophecy will be fulfilled “before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord” and just before He comes to “smite the earth with a curse.” These expressions cannot apply to the first advent of Christ. The message was only partially fulfilled by John. One of the first fruits of conversion is a revival of love in the home, when parents and children will be drawn together in love and unity.

The Jews believed that Elijah would return in person as the herald and forerunner of the Messiah, and they based their teachings on the prophecy of Malachi. They were just as badly mistaken as are those today who teach that the prophecy will be fulfilled in the appearance of an individual, usually themselves, who will possess the prophetic gift and bring reformation to modern Israel. A number are making this claim for themselves at the present time and are deceiving some unwary souls. Their lives and deceitful methods reveal the falsity of their pretensions. The final message of God will be proclaimed by multiplied thousands of people “in the spirit and power of Elijah,” and this will be especially true when the Holy Spirit again visits the church with Pentecostal power.

Like Abraham, Zacharias, because of his age and that of Elisabeth, was skeptical of the promise of a son, even though he had been praying for one. How human he was, especially in the light of our experience! The early church prayed for the release of Peter from prison, and then

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were too surprised to believe the good news when Peter appeared at the door in answer to their requests for divine intervention. How comforting it is that all Bible characters, with the exception of Jesus, were “subject to like passions as we are,” and are not pictured as being faultless, as are some of the heroes and heroines of fictitious literature! God describes men and women as they really are, and for this we should be grateful. Otherwise it would be discouraging.

Gabriel means “hero of God,” and is an appropriate name in the light of his heroic stand in the crisis over the revolt of Lucifer. Gabriel now stands “in the presence of God” where the mighty Lucifer once ministered as the first of the covering cherubs and “walked up and down in the midst of the stones of fire” on the glittering pavement of brilliant jewels which compose the floor of the throne room of the Eternal. Gabriel is the angel of prophecy, and Daniel declared that he stands next to Michael, the Son of God, in wisdom and position.

Gabriel’s introduction of himself to Zacharias was a rebuke for the priest’s lack of faith, for he had virtually demanded a sign to prove the truthfulness of his prediction. He doubtless expected some spectacular sign such as that given Gideon, but instead he was punished with dumbness until the birth of the promised son. When Zacharias finally came out of the holy place he was unable to pronounce the customary blessing, and had to make signs that he was speechless. He had to finish his appointed temple duties in silence.

The records of the birth of both John and Jesus were written by Luke, a physician who was not disturbed by their supernatural aspects, as is true now of so many physicians and theologians who refuse to believe in miracles or to admit of the incarnation and virgin birth of Christ. Luke uses the word “conceived” four times. It is used five times in the rest of the New Testament. Luke’s writings are filled with medical terms. Hobart declared that Dr. Luke used “as many medical terms for pregnancy and barrenness as did Hippocrates,” who was the celebrated Greek physician of the fourth century B.C. and is known as “the father of medicine.”

Then follows the physician’s description of Gabriel’s visit to Mary, the announcement of the birth of Jesus, and the record of her visit to the home of Zacharias and Elisabeth. Luke 1:39-41. Filled with the Holy Spirit, both Elisabeth and Mary predicted the birth and work of the Messiah. Such supernatural happenings in connection with the birth of John convinced the neighbors that he faced a special mission

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and career. As soon as Zacharias indicated the name of his son, his tongue was loosed and he was given the gift of prophecy. Verses 67-79.

These predictions relate chiefly to the mission of John, who would be “the prophet of the Highest,” who would “go before the face of the Lord to prepare His ways.” His preaching would bring to an end the long, dark night of moral and spiritual darkness and usher in the “dayspring from on high,” or “the sunrising” (margin) when “the Sun of Righteousness” would illuminate the earth with His glory. “Through which the daybreak from on high will come to us, dawning on those who now dwell in the darkness and shadow of death-to direct our feet into the path of peace.” Verses 78, 79, Weymouth.

In presenting the Elijah message for today, the messengers of the second advent are to be illumined with the light of truth, as they reveal Christ, “the true Light, which lighteth every man that cometh into the world.” To them comes the divine command: “Arise, shine; for thy light is come, and the glory of the Lord is risen upon thee. For, behold, the darkness shall cover the earth, and gross darkness the people: but the Lord shall arise upon thee, and His glory shall be seen upon thee. And the Gentiles shall come to thy light, and kings to the brightness of thy rising.” Isaiah 60:1-3.

The church today is counseled to take heed to the “more sure word of prophecy” “as unto a light that shineth in a dark place, until the day dawn, and the daystar arise in your hearts.” 2 Peter 1:19. Then will be fulfilled the forecast of Revelation 18:1, where the church is symbolized by an angel who comes down from heaven “having great power; and the earth was lightened with his glory.”