

SERMONS,

PREACHED IN

THE PARISH CHURCH OF GLASBURY,
BRECKNOCKSHIRE,

AND

ST. JAMES'S CHAPEL, CLAPHAM,
SURREY.

BY

THE REV. CHARLES BRADLEY,
VICAR OF GLASBURY.

A NEW EDITION.

LONDON:

HAMILTON, ADAMS, AND CO., AND T. HATCHARD.

1854.

SERMON XIV.

THE BAPTISM OF CHRIST.

ST. LUKE III. 21, 22.—“Now when all the people were baptized, it came to pass that Jesus also being baptized and praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Ghost descended in a bodily shape like a dove upon him, and a voice came from heaven, which said, Thou art my beloved Son; in thee I am well pleased.”

WE often say, brethren, that a man's character is best seen in his life. And we are every day acting on this maxim—we watch the conduct of those whom we wish to understand. And why should we not apply the same rule of judging to the Lord Jesus Christ? It is as true with reference to him as to any one of our fellow-men; and, in fact, there is no other way of obtaining so impressive and distinct a view of his character. Prophets have written and apostles have testified concerning him; his people on earth have told us of his excellency, and all the songs of heaven speak his praises; but if we would know the blessed Saviour aright, if we would contemplate the clearest and most affecting exhibition of his perfections, we must turn to his life; we must endeavour to learn what he is, by what he has said, suffered, and done. And he himself invites our enquiries. He calls on us, in his word, to “look unto” him, to “consider” him, to “grow in the knowledge” of him, and he promises us as the effect of this consideration and the fruit of this knowledge, an increase of grace, a removing from us of the faintness and weariness of our minds, the “multiplying “of our peace.

We have now before us the first event of his public life. Let us view it as an exhibition of his character. And may the light of his Spirit shine on it, and reveal to us in it his glory!

We will begin with the reason assigned for our Lord's baptism, then pass on to the baptism itself, and afterwards notice the wonderful event which accompanied or rather followed it.

I. St. Matthew gives us *the reason, why this baptism took place*. According to his account of the transaction, it appears that John hesitated at first to baptize his Lord. “He forbad him,” we are told, and he did this on the ground of his own inferiority and unworthiness. “I have need to be baptized of thee, and comest thou to me?” But had an angel been standing in that river instead of John, we might still have wondered that the holy Jesus should come there for such a purpose. Baptism is for sinners. It is an outward washing, indicative of inward pollution and a need of inward cleansing. But what pollution was there within that Saviour's heart? It was as free from stain then on the bank of Jordan, as it is now on the throne of God. Why then subject himself to a rite designed only for the unclean? He himself tells us. “Suffer it to be so now,” he said to John, “for thus it becometh

us to fulfil all righteousness.” He was anxious to obey every divine law, to conform to every divine institution, to work out and complete a righteousness extensive as the divine commands.

And this answer exhibits the Saviour to us in two characters, each illustrating the propriety of his baptism.

1. He stands here as *the Representative of his people*. Now they are an unclean people. Sin has defiled every one of them, and to such an extent, that they are loathsome in the sight of God, and when their eyes are opened, they are loathsome also to themselves. It is plain then that before they can be happy, happy with God or in themselves, all this uncleanness must be done away; sin must be removed from them. And now look at the Lord Jesus. It matters not how pure he may be in himself, he comes forth as the Representative of the impure, and as such, he must submit to that ordinance which is emblematical of the cleansing they need. They require the purification of the heart, the washing of the Holy Ghost; he therefore must come to Jordan to be baptized, he therefore must have its waters poured on his holy head. We argue from his appearing in their form, that he was the Representative of his sinful people; and then we argue from his being their Representative, that it became him to be baptized.

2. He was also *their Head*; standing in the relation to them of a Leader or Chief. We know that baptism is to them more than an emblem; it is an entering into the church of the living God, a rite by which they connect themselves outwardly with God and with those that are his. And observe, it is not a rite of their own choosing or appointing; it was ordained from heaven. Is there then in the wide creation some Being constituted the Head of this people? Then it is meet and right that he should go down into the waters through which they have to pass; that he should sanction the ordinance of his own appointment; that he should teach all who come after him, to reverence and obey it. “By one Spirit are we all baptized into one body,” says the apostle; and Christ enters the body of his church, becomes a partaker of its duties and privileges, in the same way. The Captain of our salvation puts on himself the garb in which he arrays his soldiers. The Commander submits first to the oath that he enjoins on his followers.

Besides, Christ has been “chosen out of the people” over whom he is exalted. He is one of the body of which he is the Chief; one of “many brethren,” though “the first-born” of all. And there is on this account also an evident propriety in his being conformed to them, as far as his holy nature will admit of this conformity. Their own hearts desire it. Their language is, “We know that the Beloved of our souls is holy, all purity within as well as all glory without; but there is no pollution in the laver in which we are commanded to wash; it will leave not a stain even on a heavenly garment; and we would have our Master use, and consecrate, and bless it. In all that

is harmless, let him be like ourselves; and O may his blessed Spirit work in us, till in all that is holy, we resemble him.”

Am I making too much, brethren, of this matter? Is it going too far to say that for the sake of being conformed to you and to me, the great Saviour will bow down his head before John and be baptized? The humble Paul goes much farther. In his epistle to the Hebrews, he ascribes to the very same cause the incarnation of Christ; he mentions it as one of the motives which drew down the Lord of the heavens into a habitation of dust. “Forasmuch,” he says, “as the children are partakers of flesh and blood, he also himself likewise took part of the same.”

II. Let us look now at *his baptism itself*.

1. The first circumstance that strikes us in it, is *his simple obedience to the divine law*.

We have been considering one reason why he should be baptized, but there were many more reasons why he should be exempt from this rite. John felt their force, and dissuaded him from proceeding; but to what did they all amount? The law of his God required of him this washing of water, and that for him was enough; he yielded a cheerful and determined obedience to it. True, he needed no washing; true, the rite was a ceremonial, and not a moral one; of no more importance in itself than the whistling of the wind around him or the murmuring of the stream at his feet; but the command of his Father had gone forth, and he would not take a step in his career of mercy till the waters of baptism had passed over him.

A lesson for you, brethren. It bids you obey the divine law, not scan it. It bids you do the will of God, not criticise it. It says, Let men talk as they will; let even the godly on the earth, ministers and prophets, reason, and explain away, and dissuade; let nature condemn and feeling shrink; all these things are to be disregarded. Is the command plain? Then there must be no reasoning about the matter; no “conferring with flesh and blood.” The right hand must come off; the right eye must be plucked out. You must go down with Christ into Jordan. You must “follow the Lamb whithersoever he goeth.” The will of God must be done, and every command of God obeyed.

2. And notice *the humility* manifested here, the amazing condescension of Christ.

From his childhood to the present hour, he had lain hidden in Galilee, unregarded and unknown; a carpenter’s son, with nothing about him to indicate the divinity of his origin or the glory he was heir to. He was now coming forth among men to make known his high pretensions. And how does he appear? Working miracles and doing wonders? Bursting forth like the sun in his brightness, “glorious in his apparel, travelling in the greatness of his strength?” No; “he cometh from Galilee to Jordan unto John to be

baptized of him.” His first act is an act of degradation. He places himself as a sinner among sinners; he bows down to a rite that none but a sinner needs. And in doing this, he disclaims all condescension, he feels no humiliation; he makes a matter of propriety of it, of justice and necessity. In his estimation, it is “only fulfilling all righteousness.”

We can hardly form one faint idea of the extent of this degradation. We think perhaps of his appearing before John as an inferior, receiving, almost begging, a service of one who was not worthy to stoop down and unloose his shoes; and we say, There was humility. This however was as nothing. From eternity he had spoken to his creatures of sin as the abominable thing that he hated. It was the only thing in his universe, that he had taught them to hate. But now who and what is he? Not indeed a sinner, but appearing as one, assuming a character he had bidden angels and archangels loathe. The manger, the stable, the carpenter’s hut and the carpenter’s toil—they were all as nothing; no word of his had poured contempt on any one of them; but to be the thing he had branded; to come forth into sight as though he were the character he abhorred; not merely to stand before the men of the earth and the wondering multitude of heaven, in “the likeness of sinful flesh,” but to act as though all the sinfulness of the flesh were upon him;—verily, brethren, this was the infinite abasement of an infinite God. We speak of the humility of angels; we ourselves feel perhaps at times a consciousness of degradation such as no language could describe, a sensation of meanness and vileness that shakes us; but what is it all? It is no more to be compared with the humiliation of Christ, than the waters of Jordan with the depths of the fathomless sea.

3. And mark also *the devotion* the Saviour manifested on this occasion.

St. Matthew tells us that the people who came with him to John, made a public confession of their sins as they were baptized in Jordan. In their case, this confession was right. It was an act of humiliation, which harmonized well with the ordinance they were observing. The holy Jesus however could take no part in it; he had not a sin to confess. But yet God is not robbed of his honour. He humbles himself before him by substituting for confession supplication and prayer. “When he was baptized,” says the sacred historian, he was baptized “praying,” openly praying; so praying, that his petitions were noticed and probably heard by the spectators around him. Indeed he seems to have begun or ended every event of his life of any peculiar importance with peculiar prayer. He prayed before his transfiguration; he lifted up his eyes to his Father, when he bid Lazarus come forth from the dead; after he had fed the multitude in the desert, he “departed into a mountain to pray;” and in his agony, “he prayed more earnestly,” prayed as though every feeling of his soul was a feeling of supplication.

Now these prayers all came from his heart. As man, he was a creature of God; and as a holy creature, he delighted in avowing his dependence on the Being who upheld him. But why were so many of his acts of devotion public? Why are we told of them? Undoubtedly to make us men of prayer. He would teach us that God is to be acknowledged in all things; that there is nothing to be done or suffered aright without prayer; that as for ordinances, they are forms and decencies without it, but nothing more. Sacraments and sermons, the reading of our Bibles and the bending of our knees—what are they all, brethren? Without a spirit of supplication, without the lifting up of an imploring heart, they are just what we often find them to be—mere gestures and words, powerless as “sounding brass or the tinkling cymbal.” These things save the soul alive? Things like these blot out the transgressions of a vile heart and a worldly life? We know that they cannot of themselves drive away one care from the aching spirit, nor make one sorrow less.

III. We come now to our third subject—*the wonderful event which attended the scene of humiliation we have been contemplating*. “It came to pass,” says the evangelist, “that Jesus also being baptized and praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Ghost descended in a bodily shape like a dove upon him, and a voice came from heaven, which said, Thou art my beloved Son; in thee I am well pleased.”

1. Observe here *the greatness of Christ*; his dignity. And it is a remarkable fact that throughout his life, whenever we see him signally abased, we generally see his Father putting on him signal honour, as though to support him in his degradation and recompense him for it; as though also infinite patience could not bear to look on One so high brought so low, without vindicating his majesty. He is born in a manger, but a star in the heavens proclaims his advent, and over him are ringing the songs of angels. He is nailed to a cross, but the shivered rocks, and the darkened sun, and the trembling earth, do him homage. He comes to Jordan to be baptized, appears as a sinner, and asks for the cleansing that sinners need;—there was a degradation and dishonour! but the heavens are opened, the Spirit descends, the voice of Jehovah cleaves the air, and where is the dishonour now? All rolled away. The humble suppliant, the cleansing water, are no longer thought of. We behold in this companion of sinners a greatness that startles and awes.

But how can we account for this mixture of things so opposite in their character? this strange combination of meanness and loftiness? Only in one way—Jesus of Nazareth is God as well as man. He is “the everlasting Father,” as well as the creature of yesterday; “the seed of the woman,” it is true, perfect man; yea, sunk so low, that he deems himself “a worm and no man, the very scorn of men and the outcast of the people;” and yet he is the

Lord of angels and the monarch of the skies, “God over all blessed for ever.” There is no other way of clearing up this seeming incongruity. Take any other ground of explanation, deny either the perfect Godhead or the perfect manhood of our Lord, and this passage, and every passage like it, is a riddle; nay, the whole Bible becomes the darkest book in the world.

2. We see here also *the Messiahship of Christ*.

Mean as was his appearance and lowly his demeanour, the pretensions of our Lord were yet of the most lofty character. He claimed to be none other than that Deliverer whose advent had been so long foretold and so ardently desired; the Son of the Highest; God come down from his throne to be the Redeemer of Israel. But how are these pretensions to be established? How is the Messiahship of this Jesus to be proved? God was determined to prove it by evidence of every kind that could be brought to bear on it. There shall be moral evidence, enough of it and to spare; and there shall be external, sensible evidence also, such as the eyes and ears of men shall comprehend. First comes the voice of prophecy, marking out the future Messiah as one on whom the Spirit of the Lord was to descend and rest; one who, at his entrance on his office, was to be anointed with the Spirit, just as earthly monarchs and priests were anointed with the holy oil. True, this was a spiritual prophecy, conveying a meaning purely spiritual, and to be fulfilled mainly in a spiritual and consequently invisible manner; but “the heart of men was waxed gross,” they were lost to spiritual ideas, and it was the will of God that their outward senses should witness the accomplishment of his words. Accordingly at the baptism of the Saviour, he condescends to make himself an object of sense. He speaks from heaven in a voice that can be heard, and descends from heaven in a form that can be seen. The eternal Spirit puts on a bodily shape like a dove, and resting, in the sight of the astonished multitude, on the head of Jesus, marks him out as the predicted and consecrated Messiah.

And while fulfilling one prophecy, the great Jehovah seems to bear in mind another ancient declaration of his lips. “Behold,” said he by Isaiah, “my servant whom I uphold; mine elect in whom my soul delighteth; I have put my Spirit upon him.” This Spirit comes down on this chosen servant; and what is the language of Jehovah now? It echoes his language by his prophet; “Thou art my beloved Son; in thee I am well pleased.”

Besides, in all this there was a special reference to John himself. It appears that though born of the same family, his personal acquaintance with our Lord was slight, or none at all. “I knew him not,” he says. He knew his pretensions, but not his person. And this was wisely ordered; it took away the appearance of contrivance and collusion. But one consequence of it was, John’s own mind stood in some degree of doubt as to the identity of Jesus; he was not sure that he was actually that son of Mary, who had been

born thirty years before at Bethlehem. His doubts therefore must be removed; and this miraculous descent of the Holy Spirit served to remove them. It was the very sign promised to him before it occurred. "He that sent me to baptize with water," he says, "the same said unto me, Upon whom thou shalt see the Spirit descending and remaining on him, the same is he which baptizeth with the Holy Ghost. And I saw, and bare record that this is the Son of God."

3. But this event establishes another point. While it proves the reality of our Lord's Messiahship, it declares his *qualifications for the discharge of this office*.

We know what the Messiah was to accomplish. It was more than instructing and moralizing the world; he came to take out a people from among its suffering inhabitants, and make them exalted and happy as the angels of God. Now before this great end can be effected, we feel at once that an atonement for our sins, though necessary for us, is but a part of what we need. There is something wrong within us; something that stands in the way of all true honour and happiness, that mars even our earthly comforts, and totally incapacitates the soul for heavenly pursuits and joys. We feel that some great change must take place within us; that the disorder of our nature must be rectified and the diseases of our spirits healed. And yet we are paralyzed. We cannot rid ourselves of this disordered mind; we are unable to attain holy and heavenly affections. It is natural therefore for us to ask, Can this Saviour help us? We know that he has silenced the thunders of the law, for in his own suffering body and agonized soul he has endured its curse; but can he cleanse these hearts of ours from their corruptions, and give us the light, and the strength, and the purity, and the blessedness, we need? This scripture assures us that he can. The Spirit descended on him in Jordan to qualify him for what we may call the moral part of his great work; to enable him to reach the mind of man, and influence and rule it. He himself tells us so. Led by the Spirit he had received, he first goes into the wilderness to have his own faith and obedience put to the test; and when he had been taught there by his own experience, what this Spirit could do for the suffering and tempted, he begins his public ministry at Nazareth by declaring the qualifications bestowed on him for the discharge of his office. "The Spirit of the Lord," he says, "is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; he hath sent me to heal the broken-hearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind; to set at liberty them that are bruised."

And this Spirit abode on him. St. Matthew informs us that the dove "rested," as well as descended on him; and St. Luke speaks of him as going up from the river into the wilderness, "full of the Holy Ghost." As God, he possessed the Spirit before; as man also, he had been from the hour of his

birth under his enlightening and upholding influence; but now at his baptism, he comes down in all his fulness on him as the Head of his church. His blessed gifts are made over to him, placed at his disposal; and for this purpose, that he may communicate them to whomsoever he will; that he may be able and authorized to baptize his people with the Holy Ghost; that, at this moment, we ourselves may lift up an imploring heart to him as he sits on his throne, and find light, and comfort, and strength, enter our souls.

4. We are taught also here *the high estimation in which the anointed Saviour is held by his Father*; the complacency and delight with which he regards him. I allude not to him in his divine nature, as he existed before he trod the earth; for this scripture makes perhaps no mention of him in this character. It exhibits him to us as one like unto ourselves, appearing among sinners in a sinner's form; and then it bids us look on the opening heavens, it bids us listen to the voice that says, as it rends the skies, to this lowly Jesus, "Thou art my beloved Son; in thee I am well pleased."

God is well pleased with his people; "he taketh pleasure," we are told, "in them that fear him;" he speaks of them as his delight, his portion, his jewels, his diadem, his glory; and he does and says this because they are connected with his Son, the purchase of his blood and the redeemed of his grace; because his own attributes and excellencies are reflected in them. What then must be his joy in that Son himself? in him from whom his people derive all in them that is glorious? in him who is the great manifestation of God to his wondering creatures; whom he himself calls by the Holy Ghost "the brightness of his glory, and the express image of his person?" Much joy flows sometimes from the poor love that is found on earth; more still from the love of heaven; but what must that joy be which flows into the infinite mind of Jehovah from such love as he can feel to such a Son! And then comes this thought, cheering and elevating to the Christian's heart—A portion of that joy will soon be mine. My God will one day say to me, "Enter thou into my joy."

From a review of this history we learn, first, *the importance which God attaches to his own ordinances*, the honour he puts on them. The dwelling-place of Jehovah is opened, a symbol of the divine majesty becomes visible to mortal eyes, the Spirit descends embodied on Christ, a voice from the throne of heaven is heard on earth declaring his greatness; and when? Not while he is performing his wonderful works, treading the waters, ruling the winds, healing the sick, or raising the dead; but while he is baptized in Jordan; while, as dependent and needy, he is looking upward in prayer.

We may despise ordinances, brethren; we may make light of sacraments; we may live and we may die without ever knowing what real prayer means; but the things that we contemn, are valued in heaven. He who came down from heaven, lived in the practice of them. All the external honour he

ever obtained while on earth from the world he had left, they procured for him. Never by power or by might did he bring it down. Thrice the voice of his Father proclaimed him blessed, but it was prayer that pierced his Father's abode. He never called his own holy Son beloved, except when he beheld him a suppliant at his feet.

We see here also *the insufficiency of ordinances*. Baptism, though administered by a prophet and received by Christ, was powerless; or if it had any efficacy, that efficacy was limited; it evidently left much undone. It could not touch the soul of Jesus; it did not qualify him for his mediatorial work. To accomplish these ends, the Holy Ghost comes down from on high, rests and abides on him.

What then do men mean, when they contend that the mere sprinkling of water can reach our earthly minds and regenerate us? What then do some of you mean by looking to sacraments, and prayers, and sermons, for acceptance with God? Brethren, all the water in all the rivers on the earth, consecrated and blessed by all the prophets and ministers the earth ever bore, could not wash away from your souls the stain of one transgression; it could not subdue within your hearts one evil passion; it could not implant there one holy thought. Experience tells us how weak sermons and sacraments often are. The emptiest tale that was ever told, could not affect us less than they at times affect some of us, nor weary us more. As for prayer, it is omnipotent; but not that prayer which goes up mingled with the workings of self-sufficiency, which looks to itself for its power, and depends on the merit that offers it, fruits reward. The same Spirit who excites prayer, must give prayer its efficacy. It is the Spirit accompanying ordinances and working by them, that makes ordinances blessings. Without this Spirit, we are far away from the light of God's countenance; his pure mind abhors us. With this Spirit subduing and cleansing us, we are, like our great Head, the beloved and delight of Jehovah. He esteems us the noblest workmanship of his hands. He rejoices more in one sanctified soul than in any other creature in the wide universe he has built.

We may infer too, from this transaction, *the importance of our Lord's atonement*. As the Representative and Head of his church, he was baptized with water; in the same character, he was anointed with the Spirit; but his church is not yet redeemed, scarcely a step has been taken towards its redemption. Much more must be endured and accomplished before one lost soul can be rescued, or one sin forgiven. There was another baptism that Christ was to be baptized with, a baptism in blood. We were not redeemed by the water of a flowing river, or by a descending Spirit; but "by the precious blood of Christ, as of a Lamb without blemish and without spot."

Brethren, on what are your hopes fixed? On any thing done by you or wrought within you? Then ask yourselves why a baptized and heaven-anointed Jesus died at Jerusalem; and dash your hopes to the ground.