

Expository Tracts, No. 116.

THE FRIEND OF THE BRIDEGROOM.

BRING

THOUGHTS ON JOHN III. 22-36.

BY THE LATE

BISHOP J. C. RYLE, D.D.

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JOHN III. 22–36.

22. After these things came Jesus and His disciples into the land of Judæa; and there He tarried with them, and baptized.
23. And John also was baptizing in Ænon near to Salim, because there was much water there: and they came, and were baptized.
24. For John was not yet cast into prison.
25. Then there arose a question between some of John's disciples and the Jews about purifying.
26. And they came unto John, and said unto him, Rabbi, He that was with thee beyond Jordan, to whom thou barest witness, behold, the same baptizeth, and all men come to Him.
27. John answered and said, A man can receive nothing, except it be given him from heaven.
28. Ye yourselves bare me witness, that I said, I am not the Christ, but that I am sent before Him.
29. 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.
30. He must increase, but I must decrease.
31. He that cometh from above is above all: he that is of the earth is earthly, and speaketh of the earth: He that cometh from heaven is above all.
32. And what He hath seen and heard, that He testifieth: and no man receiveth His testimony.
33. He that hath received His testimony hath set to his seal that God is true.
34. For he whom God hath sent speaketh the words of God: for God giveth not the Spirit by measure unto him.
35. The Father loveth the Son, and hath given all things into His hand.
36. He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life: and he that believeth not the Son shall not see life; but the wrath of God abideth on him.

ON one account this passage deserves the special attention of all devout readers of the Bible. It contains the last testimony of John the Baptist concerning our Lord Jesus Christ. That faithful man of God was the same at the end of his ministry that he was at the beginning—the same in his views of self—the same in his views of Christ. Happy is that Church whose ministers are as steady, bold, and constant to one thing as John the Baptist!

We have in these verses, *a splendid pattern of true and godly humility*. We see in John the Baptist a very different spirit from that displayed by his disciples. He begins by laying down the great principle, that acceptance with man is a special gift of God; and that we must therefore not presume to find fault, when others have more acceptance than ourselves. "A man can receive nothing except it be given him from Heaven." He goes on to remind his followers of his repeated declaration, that One greater than himself was coming: "I said, I am not the Christ." He tells them that his office compared to that of Christ is that of the bridegroom's friend, compared to the bridegroom. And finally, he solemnly affirms, that Christ must and will become greater and greater, and that he himself must become less and less important, until, like a star eclipsed by the rising sun, he has completely disappeared.

A frame of mind like this is the highest degree of grace to which mortal man can attain. The greatest saint in the sight of God is the man who is most thoroughly "clothed with humility" (1 Peter v. 5). Would we know the prime secret of being men of the stamp of Abraham, and Moses, and Job, and David, and Daniel, and St. Paul, and John the Baptist? They were all eminently humble men. Living at different ages, and enjoying very different degrees of light, in this matter at least they were all agreed. In themselves they saw nothing but sin and weakness. To God they gave all the praise of what they were. Let us walk in their steps. Let us covet earnestly the best gifts; but above all, let us covet humility. The way to true honour is to be humble. No man ever was so praised by Christ as the very man who says here, "I must decrease,"—the humble John the Baptist.

We have again, in these verses, *an instructive declaration of Christ's honour and dignity*. John the Baptist teaches his disciples once more the true greatness of the Person whose growing popularity offended them. Once more, and perhaps for the last time, he proclaims Him as one worthy of all honour and praise. He uses one striking expression after another, to convey a correct idea of the majesty of Christ. He speaks of Him as "the bridegroom" of the Church,—as "Him that cometh from above,"—as "Him whom God hath sent,"—as "Him to whom the Spirit is given without measure,"—as Him "whom the Father loves," and into "whose hands all things are given,"—to believe in whom is life everlasting, and to reject whom is eternal ruin. Each of these phrases is full of deep meaning, and would supply matter for a long sermon. All show the depth and height of John's spiritual attainments. More honourable things are nowhere written concerning Jesus, than these verses recorded as spoken by John the Baptist.

Let us endeavour in life and death to hold the same views of the Lord Jesus, to which John here gives expression. We can never make too much of Christ. Our thoughts about the Church, the ministry, and the sacraments

may easily become too high and extravagant. We can never have too high thoughts about Christ, can never love Him too much, trust Him too implicitly, lay too much weight upon Him, and speak too highly in His praise. He is worthy of all the honour that we can give him. He will be all in heaven. Let us see to it that He is all in our hearts on earth.

We have, lastly, in these verses, *a broad assertion of the nearness and presentness of the salvation of true Christians*. John the Baptist declares, “He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life.” He is not intended to look forward with a sick heart to a far distant privilege. He “hath” everlasting life as soon as he believes. Pardon, peace, and a complete title to heaven are an immediate possession. They become a believer’s own, from the very moment he puts faith in Christ. They will not be more completely his own if he lives to the age of Methuselah.

The truth before us is one of the most glorious privileges of the Gospel. There are no works to be done, no conditions to be fulfilled, no price to be paid, no wearing years of probation to be passed, before a sinner can be accepted with God. Let him only believe on Christ, and he is at once forgiven. Salvation is close to the chief of sinners. Let him only repent and believe, and this day it is his own. By Christ all that believe are at once justified from all things.