

EXPOSITORY THOUGHTS
ON THE GOSPELS.

FOR FAMILY AND PRIVATE USE.

WITH THE TEXT COMPLETE,

And many Explanatory Notes.

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JOHN III. 22-36

22 After these things came Jesus and his disciples into the land of Judaea; and there he tarried with them, and baptized.

23 And John also was baptizing in Aenon 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 bear 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, firstly, in these verses, *a humbling example of the petty jealousies and party-spirit which may exist among professors of religion*. We are told, that the disciples of John the Baptist were offended, because the ministry of Jesus began to attract more attention than that of their master. "They came unto John, and said unto him, Rabbi, He that was with you beyond Jordan, to whom you barest witness, behold the same baptizes, and all men come to Him."

The spirit exhibited in this complaint, is unhappily too common in the Churches of Christ. The succession of these complainers has never failed. There are never lacking religions professors who care far more for the increase of their own party, than for the increase of true Christianity; and who cannot rejoice in the spread of religion, if it spreads anywhere except within their own denomination. There is a generation which can see no good being done, except in the ranks of its own congregations; and which seems ready to shut men out of heaven, if they will not enter therein under their banner.

The true Christian must watch and pray against the spirit here manifested by John's disciples. It is very insidious, very contagious, and very injurious to the cause of religion. Nothing so defiles Christianity and gives the enemies of truth such occasion to blaspheme, as jealousy and party-spirit among Chris-

tians. Wherever there is real grace, we should be ready and willing to acknowledge it, even though it may be outside our own pale. We should strive to say with the apostle, "If Christ be preached, I rejoice, yes! and will rejoice." (Phil. i. 18.) If good is done, we ought to be thankful, though it even may not be done in what we think the best way. If souls are saved, we ought to be glad, whatever be the means that God may think fit to employ.

We have, secondly, 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 those who 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 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, thirdly, 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 comes from above,"—as "him whom God has 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 believes on the Son has everlasting life." He is not intended to look forward with a sick heart to a far distant privilege. He "has" 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.

Let us leave the whole passage with one grave and heart-searching thought. If faith in Christ brings with it present and immediate privileges, to remain unbelieving is to be in a state of tremendous peril. If heaven is very near to the believer, hell must be very near to the unbeliever. The greater the mercy that the Lord Jesus offers, the greater will be the guilt of those who neglect and reject it. "He that believes not the Son shall not see life; but the wrath of God abides on him."

NOTES. JOHN III. 22–36

22.—[*Came Jesus...into...land of Judæa.*] Some have thought, from this expression, that the conversation between Christ and Nicodemus did not take place in Jerusalem or Judæa, but in Galilee. Others have thought that a long interval must be supposed to have elapsed between the conversation and the events which are here narrated.—I can agree with neither view. I believe the true explanation is, that "the land" here spoken of means the rural part or territory of Judæa, in contradistinction to the capital town of the territory, Jerusalem. The meaning will then be, that Jesus left the city and went into the country districts. The expression, "Thou Bethlehem, in the land of Judæa," is similar. (Matt. ii. 6.)

[*He tarried.*] The Greek word so rendered signifies a lengthened stay. It is translated in other places, "continued" or "abode." It is note-worthy that many of the events of our Lord's ministry in Jerusalem and the surrounding district, are evidently not recorded in any of the Gospels.

[*And baptized.*] That our Lord did not baptize with His own hands, but left the ordinance to be administered by His disciples, as a work inferior to that of preaching, we may learn from the next chapter. (John iv. 2.)

Lightfoot observes that "The administration of Christ's ordinances by His ministers, according to His institution, is as His own work. The disciples' baptizing is called His baptizing."

The questions have often been raised, "In what name was this baptism administered? Was it a baptism that needed to be repeated after the day of Pentecost?"—The most probable answer to the first question is, that it was a baptism in the name of Jesus, upon profession of belief

that He was the Messiah. The most probable answer to the second question is, that it was certainly not a baptism that required repetition. To suppose that a baptism, administered by our Lord's disciples, under our Lord's own eye, and by our Lord's own command, was not as effectual and profitable an ordinance as any baptism that was ever afterwards administered, is a most improbable supposition.

It may be remarked here, that there is no ground for the common idea, that it is absolutely necessary that baptism should be administered in the name of the Trinity, in order to be a valid and Christian baptism. In three cases recorded in the Acts we are expressly told that baptism was administered in the name of Jesus Christ, and no mention is made of all three Persons in the Trinity. (See Acts ii. 38; viii. 37; x. 48.) In all these cases, however, it will be remembered, baptism in the name of Christ was practically baptism in the name of the Trinity. It was confession of faith in Him whom the Father sent, and who was the giver of the Holy Ghost.

As a general rule in the Church of Christ, no doubt baptism ought to be in the name of the Trinity. (Matt. xxviii. 19.) But that our Lord's disciples, in the place now before us, did not baptize in the name of the Trinity, is pretty certain; and that baptism in the name of Jesus is valid Christian baptism seems clear from the places referred to in the Acts.

Hutcheson remarks, that "Christ's own bodily presence, filled with the Spirit without measure, did not take away the use of external ordinances," such as baptism. The Quaker's opinion, that we need no external ordinances under the Gospel, is hard to reconcile with such a text as this.

23.—[*John also was baptizing.*] We can hardly doubt that John baptized all who came to him, at this period of his ministry, in the name of Jesus, upon confession of faith that Jesus was the Messiah. It seems most improbable that after publicly pointing out Jesus Christ as the Lamb of God, and the promised Saviour, he would be content to baptize with the baptism of repentance, which he had administered before Christ appeared. In short, John's baptism at this period, and the baptism administered by Christ's disciples, must have been precisely the same.

I may remark here, that the opinion maintained by Roman Catholics, and those who agree with them, that there was an essential difference between John's baptism and Christian baptism, seems to me entirely destitute of foundation.—I agree with Brentius, Lightfoot, and most of the Protestant Commentators, that John's baptism and Christian baptism differed only in circumstantial, but were the same in substance, and that a person baptized by John the Baptist had no need to be re-baptized after the day of Pentecost. Unless we take this view, I cannot see any evidence that Peter, and Andrew, and James, and John ever received Christian baptism at all. There is not a single word in the Gospel to show that they were ever baptized again after leaving John the Baptist's company, and becoming Christ's disciples. Moreover, we are expressly told that "Jesus Himself baptized not." (John iv. 2.) The only baptism that the first Apostles received appears to have been John the Baptist's baptism. This fact seems to me to prove irresistibly, that John's baptism was essentially of equal value with Christian baptism, and that a person baptized by John had no need to be baptized again.

The well-known passage in Acts (Acts xix. 1–6), which is always quoted in opposition to the view I maintain, does not appear to me at all conclusive and decisive upon the question now before us.—For one thing, the persons described in that passage as having only been baptized with John's baptism, seem to have been ignorant of the first principles of Christianity. They said, "We have not so much as heard whether there be any Holy Ghost." That expression shows pretty clearly that they had not been hearers of John the Baptist, who frequently spoke of the Holy Ghost (Matt. iii. 11), and had not been baptized by John himself.—It is most probable that they were inhabitants of Ephesus, who had only heard Apollos preaching, and know even less than their teacher. Whether St. Paul might not think it needful to administer baptism to such ignorant disciples as these, who could give no intelligent account of Christianity, is a question I would not undertake to decide.—But beside this, it is by no means certain that these disciples were really baptized again with water at all. Brentius holds that the words, "They were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus," mean the baptism of the Spirit. Streso maintains that the words are the concluding sentence of St. Paul's address to these ignorant men. I cannot say that either of these last views is altogether satisfactory. All I say is, that I would infinitely rather adopt either of them, than hold such a monstrous opinion as the Romish one, that John's baptism was not Christian baptism at all, and needed to be repeated. The difficulties in the way of this last view appear to me far greater than the difficulties in the way of the one which I support. To say that the first five Apostles never received any Christian baptism at all, is really preposterous. To assert that Christ Himself baptized them, is to assert what the Bible

never even hints at. There is not a shadow of proof that Jesus ever baptized a single person. I see no escape from the conclusion that Andrew, John, Peter, Philip, and Nathanael, either received John's baptism or no baptism at all.

Whatever men may think about John's baptism before the time when our Lord appeared, they will never prove that the baptism he administered in the text before us was not Christian baptism. To suppose that John would go on administering an ordinance which he knew was imperfect, while Christian baptism was being administered by Christ's disciples a few miles off, is simply absurd.

[*Enon near to Salim.*] It is not certainly known where this place was. The probability is that it was somewhere in Judæa. In the list of the cities given to the tribe of Judah, we find together "Shilhim and Ain." (Josh. xv. 32.) It is very possible that these two may be the "Anon and Salim" now before us. The changes which proper names undergo in passing from one language to another, every one knows, are very great.

[*Because there was much water.*] It is frequently assumed from this expression, that John's baptism was immersion and not sprinkling, and that on this account a great supply of water was absolutely needful. It may perhaps have been so. The point is one of no importance. That immersion, however, is necessary to the validity of baptism, and that sprinkling alone is not sufficient, are points that can never be demonstrated from Scripture. So long as water is used, it seems to be left a matter of indifference whether the person baptized is dipped or sprinkled. I should find it very hard to believe that the three thousand baptized on the day of Pentecost, or the jailor and his family, baptized at midnight in the Philippian prison, were all immersed. The Church of England wisely allows either mode of applying water to be used. To suppose that dipping is forbidden to English Churchmen is mere ignorance.

[*They came...baptized.*] This is an elliptical sentence. We are not told who are meant by "they." It is like "men," in Matt. v. 15, and means generally "people."

- 24.—[*John... not yet.. prison.*] John's diligence in his Master's work is here pointed out. He doubtless knew that his ministry was fulfilled when Christ appeared, and that the time of his own departure, and violent death under Herod's hands, was at hand. Yet he worked on to the very last. "Blessed is that servant, whom his Lord when He cometh shall find so doing." (Matt. xxiv. 46.)

Theophylact thinks that John's early death was permitted in God's providence, in order to prevent any distraction in people's minds between him and Christ.

- 25.—[*There arose...question...disciples...Jews...purifying.*] The nature and particulars of this dispute must be left to conjecture. We can only form an idea of it from the context. It seems probable that it was a dispute between the unbelieving Jews and the disciples of John the Baptist, about the comparative value of the two baptisms which were being administered in Judæa: viz., John's baptism and Christ's.—Which was the most purifying? Which was the most efficacious? Which was the most valuable of the two?—The Jews probably taunted John's disciples with the decline of their master's popularity. John's disciples, in ignorant zeal and heat for their master, probably contended that no new teacher's baptism could possibly be more purifying and valuable than their own master's.

Wordsworth remarks upon the word "purifying," that St. John never uses the word "baptism," and never calls John the Baptist by his common surname, "the Baptist." He says, "John was no longer the Baptist, when St. John wrote. His baptism had passed away."

Musculus, on this verse, observes the excessive readiness of men in every age to raise questions, controversies, and persecutions about ceremonies of merely human institution, while about faith, and hope, and love, and humility, and patience, and mortification of the flesh, and renewal of the Spirit, they exhibit no zeal at all.

Controversies about baptism certainly appear to be among the oldest and most mischievous by which the Church has been plagued.

- 26.—[*They came unto John, etc.*] The language of the whole verse seems intended to show that John's disciples were jealous for their master's ministry, and that its declining popularity, in consequence of our Lord's appearance in Judæa as a public teacher, was a cause of annoyance to them. The verse is an instructive instance of that littleness and party-spirit which are so painfully common among Christians when one minister's popularity is interfered with by the appearance of another.

[*He...with thee...thou barest witness.*] This expression shows the publicity and notoriety of John's testimony to our Lord as the Messiah and the Lamb of God. It was testimony not borne

privately in a corner, but in the hearing and full knowledge of all John's disciples. It would seem to have had very little effect on their minds. The words fell on their ears, but went no further.

[*Behold the same baptizeth.*] This expression implies partly surprise and partly complaint. In any case it shows how little the bulk of John's disciples understood that Jesus was really the Messiah promised in the prophecies. If they had understood it, they would surely neither have been surprised nor annoyed at Him for baptizing and becoming popular. They would rather have expected it and rejoiced at it. It is one among many proofs that ministers may be loved by their bearers, and may tell them the truth faithfully, and yet be utterly unable to make their hearers understand or believe. Few are like Andrew, and "follow Jesus," when their minister says, "Behold the Lamb." The most are as though they did not hear at all.

[*All men come to Him.*] These words must doubtless be taken with qualification. The expression, "all men," only means, "many persons." We know as a fact that not all men came to Christ. Moreover, we must remember, that out of those who did come to Christ, very few believed. John says in his reply to his disciples, "No man receiveth His testimony."—Allowance must be made for the irritation under which John's disciples spoke. When men are vexed in spirit, by seeing their own party diminishing, they are often tempted to use exaggerated and incorrect expressions.

Hutcheson remarks on this verse, that "Carnal emulation is an old and great sin in the Church, and even among professors; it being the foul fruit of a carnal temper to look on the success of one man's gifts as the debasing of another's who is faithful, and to count the thriving of God's work in one minister's hand the disgracing of another who is not so much flocked to."

Cyril remarks on this verse. how admirably God can bring good out of apparent evil. Here, as in many cases, a carnal and unkind saying of John's disciples gives occasion to John's admirable testimony about Christ.

27.—[*John answered... a man can receive nothing, etc.*] This sentence is the statement of a general truth in religion. Success, promotion, and growth of influence, are gifts which God keeps entirely in His own hands. If one faithful minister's popularity wanes, while another's popularity and influence over men's hearts increase, the thing is of God, and we must submit to His appointment. (Ps. lxxv. 6.)

The application of the sentence is not to Christ, as Chrysostom thought, but to John the Baptist himself, as Augustine thought. They are meant to imply, "I cannot command continued success in my ministry. I can only receive what God gives me. If He thinks fit to give any one more acceptance with men than myself, I cannot prevent it, and have no right to complain. All success is of God. All that I have had, at any period of my ministry, has been received, and none deserved."—To apply the sentence to our Lord, seems to me an unsatisfactory interpretation, and derogatory to the dignity of Christ's ministry. Those who take this view, would probably prefer the marginal reading of the word "receive," and would render it, "No man can take to himself anything." The sentence would then be like St. Paul's words to the Hebrews: "No man taketh this honour unto himself, but he that is called of God, as was Aaron." (Heb. v, 4.) But the translation, "receive," and the application to John the Baptist, appear to me more agreeable to the context, and the general spirit of John's reply. And although the word, a "man," ought not to have much stress laid upon it, I cannot help thinking that John uses it intentionally, in order to point to himself. "A mere man like me can receive nothing but what is given him from heaven."

Lightfoot thinks that the Greek word rendered "receive," means "perceive," or "apprehend;" and that John meant, "I see by this instance of yourselves, that no man can learn or understand anything, unless it be given him from heaven." He regards the sentence as John's rebuke to his disciples for incredulity and stupidity. I doubt myself whether the Greek word will bear the sense Lightfoot would put on it.

The expression, "from heaven," is equivalent to saying, "from God." (See Dan. iv. 26; Luke xv. 21.)

The whole verse is a most useful antidote to that jealousy which sometimes springs up in a minister's mind, when he sees a brother's ministry prospering more than his own.

28.—[*Ye yourselves bear me witness...I said, etc.*] John here reminds his disciples that he had repeatedly told them that he was not the Christ, and that he was only a forerunner sent before Him. They ought to have remembered this. If they had done so, they would not have been

surprised at the rise and progress of Christ's ministry, but would rather have expected Him to outshine and surpass their master, as a matter of course.

The verse is an instructive illustration of the forgetfulness of hearers. John's testimony to the dignity of Christ and His superiority to himself had been constantly repeated. But it had been all thrown away on his disciples, and when Christ began to receive greater honours than their master, and their own party began to grow smaller than that of Christ's disciples, they were offended. People soon forget what they do not like.

29.—[*He that hath... bride... bridegroom, etc.*] In this verse John the Baptist explains the relative positions occupied by himself and Christ, by a familiar illustration. In tracing it out, it is of great importance not to press the points of resemblance too far. The illustration is one which specially requires to be handled with reverence, decency, and discretion.

The "bride," in the verse, signifies the whole company of believers: the Lamb's wife. (Rev. xxi. 9.) The "bridegroom" is the Lord Jesus Christ Himself. The "friend of the bridegroom" means John the Baptist, and all other faithful ministers of Christ. According to the marriage customs of the Jews, there were certain persons called the bridegroom's friends, who were the means of communication between him and the bride before the marriage. Their duty was simply to set forward and promote the bridegroom's interests, and to remove all obstacles, as far as possible, to a speedy union of the parties. To accomplish this end and promote a thoroughly good understanding between the bride and bridegroom, was their sole office. If they saw the bridegroom's suit prospering, and at last saw him received favourably and gladly by the bride, their end was accomplished and their work was done. To all this John the Baptist makes allusion in the verse now before us. He tells his disciples that his sole work was to set forward and promote a good understanding between Christ and men. If he saw that work prospering he was thankful and would rejoice, even though the result was that his own personal importance was diminished.

He would have his disciples know that the growing popularity of Christ which offended them, was the very thing which he longed to see. He had no greater joy than to hear of the voice of Christ, the Bridegroom, being listened to by believers, the bride. It was the very thing for which he had been preaching and ministering. His "joy was fulfilled."

The word "hath" means "possesses as his own." Possession of the bride, as "bone of his bones and flesh of his flesh," is the peculiar prerogative of the bridegroom. (Gen. ii. 23.) With this his friends have nothing to do.

The expression "standeth," must probably not be pressed too far. Some think that it is taken from the position occupied by the bridegroom's friends on the day when the bride-groom was first formally introduced to the bride. They stood at a respectful distance and looked on. The expression certainly implies inferiority. St. Paul says that the Jewish priests "stand" daily ministering, but Christ "sat down" on the right hand of God. (Heb. x. 12.)

The expression, "Hearth the bridegroom's voice," like the last, is one that must not be pressed too far. It is a part of the drapery of the illustration. When report was brought to John the Baptist, that Jesus Christ's ministry was accepted by some, and that He found favour with many disciples, then was fulfilled what is here meant. John "heard the Bridegroom's voice," and saw the successful progress of his mission, and seeing and hearing this "rejoiced."

The whole verse is a most instructive picture of a true minister's work and character. He is a friend of Christ, and is ordained in order to promote a union between Christ and souls. (2 Cor. ii. 2.) He must rigidly adhere to that office, and must never take to himself that which does not belong to him. The minister who allows honour to be given to himself which only belongs to Jesus, and exalts his own office into that of a mediator and priest, is treacherously usurping a position which is not his but his Master's. The professing Christian who treats ministers as if they were priests and mediators, is dishonouring Jesus Christ, and basely giving that honour to the Bridegroom's friends which belongs exclusively to the Bridegroom Himself.

The expression, "This my joy is fulfilled," is a very instructive one for ministers. It shows that the truest happiness of a minister should consist in Christ's voice being heard by souls. "Now we live," says St. Paul, "if ye stand fast in the Lord." (1 Thess. iii. 8, etc.)

It deserves notice, than when our Lord at another period of His ministry expressly speaks of Himself as "the Bridegroom," in His reply to the disciples of John the Baptist (Matt. ix. 15), He seems purposely to remind them of their master's words.

Musculus, on this verse, observes, "The day of the Lord will declare what kind of zeal that is in our Popish Bishops, who profess to be influenced by zeal for the love of the Church,

which is Christ's bride, against Christ's enemies. The day will declare whether a zeal which makes them shed innocent blood and persecute the members of Christ, is the zeal of true friends of the Bridegroom, or of treacherous suitors of the bride."

30.—[*He must increase...I...decrease.*] In this sentence John the Baptist tells his complaining disciples that it is right and proper and necessary that Christ should grow in dignity, and that he himself should be less thought of. He was only the servant; Christ was the Master. He was only the forerunner and ambassador; Christ was the King. He was only the morning star; Christ was the Sun. The idea implied appears to be that of the stars gradually fading away, as the sun rises, after the break of day. The stars do not really perish or really become less, but they pale and become invisible before the superior brightness of the great centre of light. The sun does not really become larger, or really increase in brightness, but it becomes more fully visible, and occupies a position in which it more completely fills our vision. So was it with John the Baptist and Christ.—Every faithful minister ought to be like-minded with John. He must be content to be less thought of by his believing hearers, in proportion as they grow in knowledge and faith, and see Christ Himself more clearly. As Churches decay and fall away, they think less of Christ and more of their ministers. As Churches revive and receive spiritual life, they think less of ministers and more of Christ. To a decaying Church the sun is going down, and the stars are beginning to appear. To a reviving Church the stars are waning, and the sun appearing.

31.—[*He...cometh...above...above all.*] In this sentence John the Baptist asserts the infinite superiority of Christ over himself or any other child of Adam, whatever office he may fill. Christ is "from above." He is not merely man, but God. He came from heaven, when He took our nature on Him, and was born. As God, He is as far above all His ministers and servants as the Creator is above the creature. He is "far above all principality, and power, and every name that can be named." He is "Head over all things to the Church," and richly deserves all the honour, and dignity, and respect, and reverence that man can give. (Eph. i. 21, 22.)

[*He that is of the earth...earthly...speaketh...earth.*] In this sentence John the Baptist expresses in strong language the comparative inferiority to Christ of himself or of any other minister. "All who like me," he seems to say, "are only men, mere dust and clay, descended from a father who was made out of the dust of the ground, are comparatively earthly. The weakness and feebleness of our origin pervade all our doings. By nature earthly, our works are earthly, and our speaking and preaching earthly."—In short, there will be a savour of humanity about the ministry of every one who is naturally engendered of the seed of Adam.

The difficulty that some see in John the Baptist calling his own ministry "earthly," is quite needlessly raised. It is evident that he calls it so "comparatively." Compared to the teaching of Scribes and Pharisees, it was not earthly, but heavenly. Compared to the teaching of Him who came from heaven, it was earthly. A candle compared to darkness is light; but the same candle compared to the sun is a poor dim spark.

[*He that cometh... heaven... above all.*] This sentence is only a repetition of the beginning of the verse. It is a second assertion of Christ's greatness and superiority over any mere man, in order to impress the matter more deeply on those who heard it. "Mark what I tell you," John the Baptist seems to say to his disciples: "I repeat emphatically, that Christ having come from heaven, and being by nature God as well as man, is far above me and all other ministers, who are only men, and nothing more."

Some think, as Erasmus, Bengel, Wetstein, Olshausen, and Tholuck, that John the Baptist's words end with the verse preceding the one now before us, and that the words, "He that cometh from above," begin the comment of John the Evangelist. I cannot for a moment admit this idea to be correct. I see no necessity for it. The whole passage runs on naturally, as the language of John the Baptist, to the end of the chapter. I see nothing unsuitable to John the Baptist in the concluding verses. They contain no truth which he was not likely to know. I see nothing gained by this idea. It throws no new light on the passage, and is an awkward break which would never occur to a simple reader of the Bible.

32.—[*What...seen...heard...testifieth.*] In this sentence John the Baptist shows the divinity of Christ, and His consequent superiority over himself in another point of view. He says that Christ bears witness to truths which He has "seen and heard." He is not like mere human ministers who only declare what they have been taught by the Holy Spirit, and inspired to communicate to others. As God, He declares with authority truths which He had seen and heard and known from all eternity with the Father. (John v. 19–30; viii. 38.)

Some draw a distinction between what our Lord has seen and what He has heard. They think that what Christ has “seen,” means what He has seen as one with God the Father in essence, and what Christ has “heard,” means what He has heard as a distinct person in the Trinity.—Or else they think that what Christ has “seen,” means what He has seen with the Father as God; and what He has “heard,” what He has heard from the Father as man.—I doubt the correctness of either view. I think it more probable that the expression “seen and heard,” is only a proverbial way of signifying perfect knowledge, such as a person has intuitively or at first hand.

Euthymius thinks that the expression “seen and heard,” was purposely used, because of the weakness of John’s hearers; and that such expressions were necessary, in order to give such hearers any adequate idea of Christ’s divine nature.

The word “testifieth” deserves notice, as an expression peculiarly characteristic of Christ’s ministry. He told Pilate, “I came into the world that I should bear witness unto the truth.” (John xviii. 27.)

[*And no man receiveth His testimony.*] The expression, “no man,” in this sentence, must evidently, from the following verses, be taken with qualification. It must mean “very few.” Andrew, Peter, Philip, and others, had received Christ’s testimony. The sentence seems intended to rebuke the complaint uttered by John’s disciples: “All men come unto Him.” John seems to say, “However many persons come to hear Jesus, you will yet see that very few believe on Him. Great as He is, and deserving of far more reverence than myself, you have yet to learn that even He is really believed on by few. The crowds who follow Him are, unhappily, not true believers. The temporary popularity which attends His ministry, is as worthless as that which attended my own.”

Pearce thinks that the Greek word rendered “and,” would have been better translated “and yet,” as in John vii. 19 and ix. 30.

The notion of Augustine’s, that “no man,” in this sentence means, “none of the wicked,” seems very untenable and unsatisfactory.

33.—[*He that hath received, etc.*] In this verse John shows the great importance of receiving Christ’s testimony. So far from being offended by the crowd which attended Christ’s ministry, John’s disciples should be thankful that so many heard Him, and that some few received His teaching into their hearts.

[*Hath set to his seal.*] This expression is peculiar, and found nowhere else in the New Testament, in the same sense. Of course it does not mean any literal sealing. It only means, “hath formally declared his belief,—hath publicly professed his conviction,”—just as a man puts his seal to a document, as a testimony that he consents to its contents. In ancient days, when few comparatively could write, to affix a seal to a paper, was a more common mode of expressing assent to it, than to sign a name.—The sentence is equivalent to saying, “He that receives Christ’s testimony, has set down his name as one who believes that God is true.”

[*That God is true.*] These words may be taken two ways. According to some they mean, “He that receives Christ, declares his belief that it is the true God who has sent Christ; and that Christ is no imposter, but the Messiah, whom the true God of the Old Testament prophets promised to send.”—According to others they mean, “He that receives Christ, declares his belief that God is true to His word, and has kept the promise that He made to Adam, Abraham, and David.” That the Greek word rendered “true,” will bear this last meaning, seems proved by the expression, “Let God be true, but every man a liar.” (Rom. iii. 4.) Either view makes good sense and good divinity; but on the whole, I prefer the second one. It seems to me strongly confirmed by the expression in St. John’s 1st Epistle: “He that believeth not God hath made Him a liar; because he believeth not the record that God gave of His Son.” (1 John v. 10.)

Some have thought that the sentence may mean, “He that receives Christ, declares his belief that Christ is the true God,” and that it is parallel to 1 John v. 20: “This is the true God.”—But I do not think the Greek words will admit of the interpretation. If they would, the Greek fathers would never have overlooked this text in writing against the Arians. —Maldonatus seems to favour this opinion, and says that Cyril holds it. But it certainly does not clearly appear in Cyril’s commentary on the place.

34.—[*He whom God hath sent.*] In this verse John the Baptist shows the dignity of Christ, and His superiority over all other teachers, by another striking declaration about Him. He begins by giving Him the well-known epithet which was peculiarly applied to Messiah, “He whom

God hath sent,—the sent One: the One whom God has sent into the world according to promise.”

[*Speaketh the words of God.*] This sentence means that Christ’s words were not the words of a mere man, like John himself, or one of the prophets. They were nothing less than the words of God. He who heard them heard nothing less than God speaking. The unity of the Father and the Son is so close that he who hears the teaching of the Son hears the teaching of the Father also. (Compare John vii. 16; v. 19; xiv. 10, 11; viii. 28; xii. 49.) When John the Baptist spoke, he spoke merely human words, however true and good and Scriptural. But when Christ spoke, He spoke Divine words; even the words of God Himself. As Quesnel says, “He spoke by the Holy Ghost, who is His own Spirit, who inseparably dwelleth in Him, and by the possession of whose fulness He receives His unction and consecration.”

Theophylact remarks on this sentence and others like it in St. John’s Gospel, that we must not suppose that Christ needed to be taught by God the Father what to speak, because whatever the Father knows the Son also knows, as consubstantial with Him. So also when we read of the Son being “sent,” we must think of Him as a ray sent from the sun, which is not in reality separate from the sun, but a part of the sun itself.

Some think that the expression, “speaketh the words of God,” in this place, has special reference to the promise given to Moses about Messiah: “I will put my words in His mouth.” (Deut. xviii. 18.)

[*For God giveth not...Spirit by measure...Him.*] The expression, “by measure,” in this sentence, means, “partially, scantily, stintedly, in small degree.” It is the opposite to fully, completely, in unmeasured abundance.” Thus we read in Ezekiel’s description of a time of scarcity at Jerusalem, “They shall drink water by measure.” (Ezek. iv. 16.)

The whole sentence is peculiar, and requires careful interpretation. The object of John the Baptist is to show once more the infinite superiority of the Lord Jesus over himself or any other man. To all others, even to the most eminent prophets and apostles, God gives the Holy Spirit “by measure.” Their gifts and graces are both imperfect. As St. Paul says, they “know in part and prophesy in part.” (1 Cor. xiii. 9.) But with Him whom God hath sent, it is very different. To Him the Holy Ghost is given without measure, in infinite fulness and completeness. In His human nature the gifts and graces of the Spirit are present without the slightest shadow of imperfection. As man, Jesus of Nazareth was anointed with the Holy Ghost, and fitted for His office as our Priest and Prophet and King, in a way and degree never granted to any other man. (Acts x. 38.)

All this is undoubtedly true, but it is not, in my opinion, the whole truth of the sentence. I believe that John the Baptist points not only to our Lord’s human nature, but to His divinity. I believe his meaning to be, “He whom God hath sent, is One far above prophets and ministers, to whom the Spirit is only given by measure. He is One who is Himself very God. In Him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily. He is One who, as a Person in the Trinity, is eternally and ineffably united with God the Holy Spirit. From Him the Holy Spirit proceeds as well as from the Father, and is the Spirit of Christ and the Spirit of the Son. As God, it is impossible that He can be separated from the Holy Spirit. To Him therefore the Spirit is not given by measure, as if He were only a man. He is God as well as man, and as such He needeth not that the Spirit should be given to Him. He has the Spirit without measure, because in the Divine essence, He, and the Spirit, and the Father, are One and undivided.”

I am inclined to hold the view just stated, because of the verse which follows. The object of John the Baptist, in this last testimony to Christ, appears to be to lead his disciples step by step to the highest view of Messiah’s dignity. He would have them recognise in Him One who was very God as well as very man. The view of the sentence before us which is commonly adopted, appears to me of an unsafe tendency. That the Spirit was given to our Lord as man, and given without measure, is doubtless true. But we must be very careful that we never forget a truth of no less importance. That truth is, that our Lord Jesus Christ never ceased to be God as well as man, and that as God He was never separate from the Spirit. As Henry says, “The Spirit dwelt in Him, not as in a vessel, but as in a fountain, as in a bottomless ocean.”

It deserves remark that the concluding words of the verse, “unto Him,” are not found in the original Greek. This has led some to maintain that the second clause of the verse is only a general statement: “God is not a God who gives the Spirit by measure.” But all the best commentators, from Augustine downwards, hold the view of our translators, that it is Christ who is signified, and that “unto Him” ought to be supplied in any translation.

Chemnitius thinks that this verse specially refers to Isa. xi. 2, where it is predicted that the seven-fold gifts of the Spirit shall rest on Messiah.

35.—[*The Father loveth... Son... given all...hand.*] There is something, at first sight, abrupt and elliptical in this verse. The full meaning of it I believe to be as follows: “He whom God hath sent is One far above me or any other prophet. He is the eternal Son of God, whom the Father loved from all eternity, and into whose hands all things concerning man’s salvation have been given and committed by an everlasting covenant. He is no mere man, as you, my disciples, ignorantly suppose. He is the Son of whom it is written, ‘Kiss the Son lest He be angry, and so ye perish from the way.’ He is the Son to whom the Father has said, ‘I will give Thee the heathen for thine inheritance, and the uttermost parts of the earth for thy possession.’ (Ps. ii. 7–9.) Instead of being jealous of His present popularity, you should serve Him with fear, and rejoice before Him with trembling.” The “love of the Father toward the Son” here spoken of, is a subject far too deep for man to fathom. It is an expression graciously accommodated to man’s feeble understanding, and intended to signify that most intimate and ineffable union which exists between the First and Second Persons in the blessed Trinity, and the entire approbation and complacency with which the Father regards the work of redemption undertaken by the Son. It is that love to which our Lord refers in the words, “Thou lovedst Me before the foundation of the world” (John xvii. 24), and which the Father expressly asserted at the beginning of the Son’s earthly ministry: “This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.” (Matt. iii. 17.)

When it says, that “the Father hath given all things into the Son’s hand, we must understand that mediatorial kingdom which in the eternal counsels of the Trinity has been appointed to Christ. By the terms of the everlasting covenant, the Father has given to the Son power over all flesh, to quicken whom He will,—to justify, to sanctify, to keep, and to glorify His people,—to judge, and finally punish the wicked and unbelieving,—and at last to take to Himself a kingdom over all the world, and put down every enemy under His feet. These are the “all things,” of which John speaks. Christ, he would have us know, has the keys of death and hell in His hand, and to Him alone men must go, if they want anything for their souls.

Calvin observes on this verse, “The love here spoken of is that peculiar love of God, which, beginning with the Son, flows from Him to all the creatures. For that love, with which, embracing His Son He embraces us also in Him, leads Him to communicate all His benefits to us by His hand.”

Quesnel remarks, “God loved the prophets as His servants; but He loves Christ as His only Son, and communicates Himself to Him in proportion to His love.”—“The prophets had only particular commissions, limited to a certain time and certain purposes; but Christ has full power given Him as the general disposer of all His Father’s works, the executor of His designs, the head of His Church, the universal High Priest of good things to come, the steward and disposer of all His graces.”

Chemnitius, on this verse, remarks the infinite wisdom and love of God in giving the management of our soul’s affairs into Christ’s hand. We are all naturally so weak and feeble, that if anything was left in our hands we should never be saved. We should lose all, even sooner than Adam did in Paradise. But Christ will take care of all committed to His charge, and our wisdom is to commit all things to Him, as St. Paul did. (2 Tim. i. 12.)

36.—[*He that believeth...Son...hath...life.*] In this verse John the Baptist concludes his testimony to Christ, by a solemn declaration of the unspeakable importance of believing on Him. Whether his disciples would receive it or not, he tells them that life or death, heaven or hell, all turned on believing in this Jesus who had “been with him beyond Jordan.”

The excellence of faith should be noted here. Like his Divine Master, John teaches that “believing on the Son,” is the principal thing in saving religion: Believing is the way to heaven, and not believing the way to hell.

The “presentness” of the salvation which is in Christ should be here noted. Again, like his Divine Master, John teaches that a believer “hath” everlasting life. Pardon, peace, and a title to heaven, are at once and immediately a man’s possession, the very moment that he lays his sins on Jesus, and puts his trust in Him.

[*He that believeth not...not see life.*] The Greek word here rendered “believeth not,” is quite different from the one translated “believeth,” at the beginning of the verse. It means something much stronger than “not trusting.” It would be more literally rendered, “He that does not obey, or is disobedient to.” It is the same word so rendered in Rom. ii. 8; x. 21; 1 Pet. ii. 8; iii. 1–20.

The expression, "shall not see life," must of course mean, "shall not see life, if he continues impenitent and unbelieving, and dies in that state." The phrase, "to see life," most probably means, "to taste, enter, enjoy, possess life," and must not be literally interpreted as seeing either with bodily or mental eyes.

[*The wrath of God abideth on him.*] This concluding sentence of John the Baptist's testimony, is again very like his Master's teaching: "He that believeth not is condemned already." The meaning of the sentence is, that so long as a man is not a believer in Christ, the just wrath of God hangs over him, and he is under the curse of God's broken law. We are all by nature born in sin, and children of wrath; and our sins are all upon us, unpardoned, unforgiven, and untaken away, until that day when we believe on the Son of God, and are made children of grace.

The sentence is a very instructive one, and especially so in the present day. I see in it an unanswerable reply to some grievous errors which are very prevalent in some quarters.

(a) It condemns the notion, upheld by some, that under the Gospel there is no more anger in God, and that He is only love, mercy, and compassion, and nothing else. Here we are plainly told of "the wrath of God." It is clear that God hates sin. There is a hell. God can be angry. Sinners ought to be afraid.

(b) It condemns the notion, maintained by some, that the elect are justified from all eternity, or justified before they believe. Here we are plainly told that if a man believe not on the Son, God's wrath abideth on him. We know nothing of any one's justification until he believes. Those whom God predestinates, God calls and justifies in due season. But there is no justification until there is faith.

(c) It condemns the modern idea, that Christ by His death justified all mankind, and removed God's wrath from the whole seed of Adam; and that all men and women are justified in reality, though they do not know it, and will all finally be saved.

This idea sounds very amiable, but is flatly contrary to the text before us. Here we are plainly told, that until a man "believeth on the Son of God, the wrath of God abideth on him."

(d) Finally, it condemns the weak and false charity of those who say that preachers of the Gospel should never speak of God's wrath, and should never mention hell. Here we find that the last words of one of Christ's best servants, consist of a solemn declaration of the danger of unbelief. "The wrath of God" is John's last thought. To warn men of God's wrath, and of their danger of hell, is not harshness, but true charity. Many will go to hell, because their ministers never told them about hell.

In leaving the passage, the variety of expressions used by John the Baptist concerning our Lord Jesus Christ, is very worthy of notice. He calls Him the Christ,—the Bridegroom,—Him that cometh from above,—Him that testifieth what He hath seen and heard,—Him whom God hath sent,—Him who has the Spirit without measure,—Him whom the Father loves,—Him into whose hands all things are given,—Him in whom to believe is everlasting life. To talk of John the Baptist's knowledge of Divine things as meagre and scanty, in the face of such a passage as this, is, to say the least, not wise, and argues a very slight acquaintance with Scripture. To suppose, as some do, that the man who had such clear views of our Lord's nature and office, could afterwards doubt whether Jesus was the Christ, is to suppose what is grossly improbable. The message that John sent to Jesus when he was in prison, was for the sake of his disciples, and not for his own satisfaction. (Matt. xi. 3, etc.)