

Expository Tracts, No. 107.

JOHN THE BAPTIST.

BEING
THOUGHTS ON JOHN I. 19-28.

BY THE LATE
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JOHN I. 19-28.

19. And this is the record of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, Who art thou?
20. And he confessed, and denied not; but confessed, I am not the Christ.
21. And they asked him, What then? Art thou Elias? And he saith, I am not. Art thou that prophet? And he answered, No.
22. Then said they unto him, Who art thou? that we may give an answer to them that sent us. What sayest thou of thyself?
23. He said, I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, Make straight the way of the Lord, as said the prophet Esaias.
24. And they which were sent were of the Pharisees.
25. And they asked him, and said unto him, Why baptizest thou then, if thou be not that Christ, nor Elias, neither that prophet?
26. John answered them, saying, I baptize with water; but there standeth One among you, whom ye know not;
27. He it is, who coming after me is preferred before me, whose shoe's latchet I am not worthy to unloose.
28. These things were done in Bethabara beyond Jordan where John was baptizing.

THESE verses begin the properly historical part of St. John's Gospel. Hitherto we have been reading deep and weighty statements about Christ's divine nature, incarnation, and dignity. Now we come to the plain narrative of the days of Christ's earthly ministry, and the plain story of Christ's doings and sayings among men. And here, like other Gospel writers, St. John begins at once with "the record" or testimony of John the Baptist (Matt. iii. i; Mark i. 2; Luke iii. 2).

We have, for one thing, in these verses *an instructive example of true humility*. That example is supplied by John the Baptist himself.

John the Baptist was an eminent saint of God. There are few names which stand higher than his in the Bible calendar of great and good men. The Lord Jesus Himself declared that "Among them that are born of women there hath not risen a greater than John the Baptist" (Matt. xi. 11). The Lord Jesus Himself declared that he was a "burning and a shining light" (John v. 35). Yet here in this passage we see this eminent saint lowly, self-abased, and full of humility. He puts away from himself the honour which

the Jews from Jerusalem were ready to pay him. He declines all flattering titles. He speaks of himself as nothing more than the “voice of one crying in the wilderness,” and as one who “baptized with water.” He proclaims loudly that there is One standing among the Jews far greater than himself, One whose shoe’s latchet he is not worthy to unloose. He claims honour not for himself, but for Christ. To exalt Christ was his mission, and to that mission he steadfastly adheres.

The greatest saints of God in every age of the Church have always been men of John the Baptist’s spirit. In gifts, and knowledge, and general character they have often differed widely. But in one respect they have always been alike: they have been “clothed with humility” (1 Pet. v. 5). They have not sought their own honour. They have thought little of themselves. They have been ever willing to decrease if Christ might only increase, to be nothing if Christ might be all. And here has been the secret of the honour God has put upon them. “He that humbleth himself shall be exalted” (Luke xiv. 11).

If we profess to have any real Christianity, let us strive to be of John the Baptist’s spirit. Let us study humility. This is the grace with which all must begin who would be saved. We have no true religion about us until we cast away our high thoughts, and feel ourselves sinners. This is the grace which all saints may follow after, and which none have any excuse for neglecting. All God’s children have not gifts, or money, or time to work, or a wide sphere of usefulness; but all may be humble. This is the grace, above all, which will appear most beautiful in our latter end. Never shall we feel the need of humility so deeply as when we lie on our death-beds, and stand before the judgment-seat of Christ. Our whole lives will then appear a long catalogue of imperfections, ourselves nothing, and Christ all.

We have, for another thing, in these verses, *a mournful example of the blindness of unconverted men*. That example is supplied by the state of the Jews who came to question John the Baptist.

These Jews professed to be waiting for the appearance of Messiah. Like all Pharisees they prided themselves on being children of Abraham, and possessors of the covenant. They rested in the law, and made their boast of God. They professed to know God’s will, and to believe God’s promises. They were confident that they, themselves, were guides of the blind, and lights of them that sat in darkness (Rom. ii. 17–19). And yet at this very moment their souls were utterly in the dark. “There was standing among them,” as John the Baptist told them. “One whom they knew not,” Christ Himself, the promised Messiah, was in the midst of them, and yet they neither knew Him, nor saw Him, nor received Him, nor acknowledged Him,

nor believed Him. And, worse than this, the vast majority of them never would know Him! The words of John the Baptist are a prophetic description of a state of things which lasted during the whole of our Lord's earthly ministry. Christ "stood among the Jews," and yet the Jews knew Him not, and the greater part of them died in their sins.

It is a solemn thought that John the Baptist's words in this place apply strictly to thousands in the present day. Christ is still standing among many who neither see, nor know, nor believe Christ is passing by in many a parish and many a congregation, and the vast majority have neither an eye to see Him, nor an ear to hear Him. The "spirit of slumber" seems poured out upon them. Money, and pleasure, and the world they know; but they know not Christ. The kingdom of God is close to them; but they sleep. Salvation is within their reach; but they sleep. Mercy, grace, peace, heaven, eternal life, are so nigh that they might touch them; and yet they sleep. "Christ standeth among them, and they know Him not." These are sorrowful things to write down. But every faithful minister of Christ can testify, like John the Baptist, that they are true.

What are we doing ourselves? This, after all, is the great question that concerns us. Do we know the extent of our religious privileges in this country, and in these times? Are we aware that Christ is in the midst of us, going to and fro in our land, inviting souls to join Him, and to be His disciples? Do we know that the time is short, and the door of mercy will soon be closed for evermore? Do we know that Christ rejected will soon be Christ withdrawn? Happy are they who can give a good account of these inquiries, and who "know the day of their visitation!" (Luke xix. 44). It will be better at the last day never to have been born, than to have had Christ "standing among us," and not to have known Him.