

EXPOSITORY THOUGHTS. ON THE GOSPELS.

FOR FAMILY AND PRIVATE USE.

WITH THE TEXT COMPLETE,

And Many Explanatory Notes.

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LUKE I. 13–17.

13 But the angel said unto him, Fear not, Zacharias: for thy prayer is heard; and thy wife Elisabeth shall bear thee a son, and thou shalt call his name John.

14 And thou shalt have joy and gladness; and many shall rejoice at his birth.

15 For he shall be great in the sight of the Lord, and shall drink neither wine nor strong drink; and he shall be filled with the Holy Ghost, even from his mother's womb.

16 And many of the children of Israel shall he turn to the Lord their God.

17 And he shall go before him in the spirit and power of Elias, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just; to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.

WE have, in these verses, the words of the angel who appeared to Zacharias. They are words full of deep spiritual instruction.

We learn here, for one thing, that *prayers are not necessarily rejected, because the answer is long delayed*. Zacharias, no doubt, had often prayed for the blessing of children, and, to all appearance, had prayed in vain. At his advanced time of life, he had probably long ceased to mention the subject before God, and had given up all hope of being a father. Yet the very first words of the angel show plainly that the bygone prayers of Zacharias had not been forgotten:—“Thy prayer is heard: thy wife Elisabeth shall bear thee a son.”

We shall do well to remember this fact, whenever we kneel down to pray. We must beware of hastily concluding that our supplications are useless, and specially in the matter of intercessory prayer on behalf of others. It is not for us to prescribe either the time or the way in which our requests are to be answered. He who knows best the time for people to be born, knows also the time for them to be born again. Let us rather “continue in prayer,” “watch unto prayer,” “pray always, and not faint.” “Delay of effect,” says an old divine, “must not discourage our faith. It may be, God hath long granted, ere we shall know of His grant.”

We learn, in the second place, that *no children cause such true joy, as those who have the grace of God*. It was a child about to be filled with the Holy Ghost, to whose father it was said, “Thou shalt have joy and gladness; and many shall rejoice at his birth.”

Grace is the principal portion that we should desire for our children. It is a thousand times better for them than beauty, riches, honours, rank, or high connections. Till they have grace we never know what they may do. They may make us weary of our life, and bring down our grey hairs with sorrow to the grave. When they are converted, and not till then, they are provided for, both for time and eternity. “A wise son maketh a glad father.” (Prov. x. 1.) Whatever we seek for our sons and daughters, let us first seek that they may have a place in the covenant, and a name in the book of life.

We learn, in the third place, *the nature of true greatness*. The angel describes it, when he tells Zacharias that his son “shall be great in the sight of

the Lord."

The measure of greatness which is common among men is utterly false and deceptive. Princes and potentates, conquerors and leaders of armies, statesmen and philosophers, artists and authors,—these are the kind of men whom the world calls "great." Such greatness is not recognised among the angels of God. Those who do great things for God, they reckon great. Those who do little for God, they reckon little. They measure and value every man according to the position in which he is likely to stand at the last day.

Let us not be ashamed to make the angels of God our example in this matter. Let us seek for ourselves and our children that true greatness which will be owned and recognized in another world. It is a greatness which is within the reach of all,—of the poor as well as the rich, —of the servant as well as of the master. It does not depend on power or patronage, on money or on friends. It is the free gift of God to all who seek it at the Lord Jesus Christ's hands. It is the portion of all who hear Christ's voice and follow Him,—who fight Christ's battle and do Christ's work in the world. Such may receive little honour in this life. But great shall be their reward at the last day.

We learn, in the fourth place, that *children are never too young to receive the grace of God*. Zacharias is informed that his son "shall be filled with the Holy Ghost, even from his mother's womb."

There is no greater mistake than to suppose that infants, by reason of their tender age, are incapable of being operated upon by the Holy Spirit. The manner of His work upon a little child's heart, is undoubtedly mysterious and incomprehensible. But so also are all His works upon the sons of men. Let us beware of limiting God's power and compassion. He is a merciful God. With Him nothing is impossible.

Let us remember these things in connection with the subject of infant baptism. It is a feeble objection to say that infants ought not to be baptized, because they cannot repent and believe. If an infant can be filled with the Holy Ghost, he is surely not unworthy to be admitted into the visible church. Let us remember these things specially in the training of young children. We should always deal with them as responsible to God. We should never allow ourselves to suppose that they are too young to have any religion. Of course we must be reasonable in our expectations. We must not look for evidences of grace, unsuitable to their age and capacities. But we must never forget that the heart which is not too young to sin, is also not too young to be filled with the grace of God.

We learn, in the last place, from these verses, *the character of a really great and successful minister of God*. The picture is set before us in a striking manner by the angel's description of John the Baptist. He is one who will "turn hearts,"—turn them from ignorance to knowledge, from carelessness

ness to thoughtfulness, from sin to God.—He is one who will “go before the Lord,”—he will delight in nothing so much as being the messenger and herald of Jesus Christ.—He is one who “will make ready a people for the Lord.” He will strive to gather out of the world a company of believers, who will be ready to meet the Lord in the day of His appearing.

For such ministers let us pray night and day. They are the true pillars of a Church,—the true salt of the earth,—the true light of the world. Happy is that Church, and happy is that nation, which has many such men. Without such men, learning, titles, endowments, and splendid buildings, will keep no Church alive. Souls will not be saved,—good will not be done,—Christ will not be glorified, excepting by men full of the Holy Ghost.

NOTES. LUKE I. 13-17.

- 13.—[*His name John.*] The word John means “the grace, gift, or mercy of the Lord.” *Cruden.*
- 15.—[*Drink neither wine nor strong drink.*] From this it would appear that John the Baptist was a Nazarite, or person separated by special vow to the Lord. (See Num. vi. 3.)
- 17.—[*Spirit and power of Elias.*] Theophylact properly remarks on this expression, that “as Elias is the precursor of Christ’s second advent, so also John is the precursor of the first advent.” Let it be carefully noted that Gabriel does not say that John shall be Elias himself, but that he shall go “in the spirit and power of Elias.” The real advent of Elias, to fulfil the prophecy of Malachi, is, in all probability, a thing yet to come.

[*To turn the heart of the fathers to the children.*] This is a dark and difficult expression, and one which seems to perplex the commentators much. The most likely explanation is that of De Dieu. He considers it to mean, “the fathers upon, or together with, the children,”—that is, all ages, and all sorts of people,—parents and children together. He supports this view by the Septuagint version of Exodus xii. 8. Montanus, Vatablus, Barradius, Hammond and Watson take the same view. So also does Bengel, and quotes in support of it the Septuagint version of Genesis xxiii. 11.