EXPOSITORY THOUGHTS.

ON THE GOSPELS.

FOR FAMILY AND PRIVATE USE.

WITH THE TEXT COMPLETE,  
*And Many Explanatory Notes*.

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LUKE I. 57–66.

*57* NowElisabeth’s full time came that she should be delivered; and she brought forth a son.

58 And her neighbours and her cousins heard how the Lord had showed great mercy upon her; and they rejoiced with her.

59 And it came to pass, that on the eighth day they came to circumcise the child; and they called him Zach­arias, after the name of his father.

60 And his mother answered and said, Not *so;* but he shall be called John.

61 And they said unto her, There is none of thy kindred that is called by this name.

62 And they made signs to his fa­ther, how he would have him called.

63 And he asked for a writing table, and wrote, saying, His name is John. And they marvelled all.

64 And his mouth was opened im­mediately, and his tongue *loosed,* and he spake, and praised God.

*65* And fear came on all that dwelt round about them: and all these say­ings were noised abroad throughout all the hill country of Judæa.

66 And all they that heard *them* laid *them* upin their hearts, saying, What manner of child shall this be? And the hand of the Lord was with him.

WE have in this passage the history of a birth, the birth of a burning and shining light in the Church, the forerunner of Christ Himself,—John the Baptist. The language in which the Holy Ghost describes the event is well worthy of remark. It is written that “The Lord showed great mercy on Elisabeth.” There was mercy in bringing her safely through her time of trial. There was mercy in making her the mother of a living child. Happy are those family circles, whose births are viewed in this light—as especial instances of “the mercy” of the Lord.

We see in the conduct of Elisabeth’s neighbours and cousins, a *striking example of the kindness we owe to one another.* It is written that “They rejoiced with her.”

How much more happiness there would be in this evil world, if conduct like that of Elisabeth’s relations was more common! Sympathy in one another’s joys and sorrows costs little, and yet is a grace of most mighty power. Like the oil on the wheels of some large engine, it may seem a trifling and unimportant thing, yet in reality it has an immense influence on the comfort and well-working of the whole machine of society. A kind word of congratulation or consolation is seldom forgotten. The heart that is warmed by good tidings, or chilled by affliction, is peculiarly susceptible, and sympathy to such a heart is often more precious than gold.

The servant of Christ will do well to remember this grace. It seems “a little one,” and amidst the din of controversy, and the battle about mighty doctrines, we are sadly apt to overlook it. Yet it is one of those pins of the tabernacle which we must not leave in the wilder­ness. It is one of those ornaments of the Christian character which make it beautiful in the eyes of men. Let us not forget that it is enforced upon us by a special precept: “Rejoice with them that do rejoice, and weep with them that weep.” (Rom. xii. 15.) The practice of it seems to bring down a special blessing. The Jews who came to comfort Mary and Martha at Bethany, saw the greatest miracle that Jesus ever worked.—Above all, it is com­mended to us by the most perfect example. Our Lord was ready both to go to a marriage feast, and to weep at a grave. (John ii. 1, &c. John xi. 1, &c.) Let us be ever ready to go and do likewise.

We see in the conduct of Zacharias in this passage, *a* *striking example of the benefit of affliction.* He resists the wishes of his relations to call his new-born son after his own name. He clings firmly to the name “John,” by which the angel Gabriel had commanded him to be called. He shows that his nine months’ dumbness had not been inflicted on him in vain. He is no longer faithless, but believing. He now believes every word that Gabriel had spoken to him, and every word of his message shall be obeyed.

We need not doubt that the past nine months had been a most profitable time to the soul of Zacharias. He had learned, probably, more about his own heart, and about God, than he ever knew before. His conduct shows it. Correction had proved instruction. He was ashamed of his unbelief. Like Job, he could say, “I have heard of thee by the hearing of the ear, but now mine eye seeth thee.” Like Hezekiah, when the Lord left him, he had found out what was in his heart. (Job xlii. 5. 2 Chron. xxxii. 31.)

Let us take heed that affliction does us good, as it did to Zacharias. We cannot escape trouble in a sin-laden world. Man is born to trouble, as the sparks fly upwards. (Job v. 27.) But in the time of our trouble, let us make earnest prayer that we may “hear the rod and who hath appointed it,” that we may learn wisdom by the rod, and not harden our hearts against God. “Sanctified afflictions,” says an old divine, are “spiritual promotions.” The sorrow that humbles us, and drives us nearer to God, is a blessing, and a downright gain. No case is more hopeless than that of the man who, in time of affliction, turns his back upon God. There is an awful mark set against one of the kings of Judah: “In the time of his distress he did trespass yet more against the Lord: this is that king Ahaz.” (2 Chron. xxviii. 22.)

We see in the early history of John Baptist the *nature of the blessing that we should desire for all young children.* We read that “the hand of the Lord was with him.”

We are not told distinctly what these words mean. We are left to gather their meaning from the promise that went before John before his birth, and the life that John lived all his days. But we need not doubt that the hand of the Lord was with John to sanctify and renew his heart—to teach and fit him for his office—to strengthen him for all his work as the forerunner of the Lamb of God—to encourage him in all his bold denunciation of men’s sins—and to comfort him in his last hours, when he was beheaded in prison. We know that he was filled with the Holy Ghost from his mother’s womb. We need not doubt that from his earliest years the grace of the Holy Ghost appeared in his ways. In his boyhood as well as in his manhood the constraining power of a mighty principle from above appeared in him. That power was the “hand of the Lord.”

This is the portion that we ought to seek for our children. It is the best portion, the happiest portion, the only portion that can never be lost, and will endure be­yond the grave. It is good to have over them “the hand” of teachers and instructors; but it is better still to have “the hand of the Lord.” We may be thankful if they obtain the patronage of the great and the rich. But we ought to care far more for their obtaining the favour of God. The hand of the Lord is a thousand times better than the hand of Herod. The one is weak, foolish, and uncertain; caressing today, and beheading tomorrow. The other is almighty, all-wise, and unchangeable. Where it holds it holds for evermore. Let us bless God that the Lord never changes. What He was in John the Baptist’s days, He is now. What He did for the son of Zacharias, He can do for our boys and girls. But He waits to be entreated. If we would have the hand of the Lord with our children, we must diligently seek it.

NOTES. LUKE I. 57–66.

59*.—*[*Eighth day.*]This was in accordance with Leviticus xii. 3. If a child died uncircumcised before the eighth day, we find nothing in Scripture to warrant our saying that it was not saved. By parity of reason we may justly conclude that baptism is not absolutely necessary to the salvation of infants under the Chris­tian dispensation. It is not the want of ordinances, but the contempt of them that destroys souls. Of this contempt a little infant cannot be guilty.

62*.—*[*Made signs.*]This expression seems to make it probable that Zacharias was deaf as well as dumb.