

EXPOSITORY THOUGHTS. ON THE GOSPELS.

FOR FAMILY AND PRIVATE USE.

WITH THE TEXT COMPLETE,

And Many Explanatory Notes.

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ST. LUKE. VOL. I.

LONDON:

WILLIAM HUNT AND COMPANY, 23, HOLLES STREET.
CAVENDISH SQUARE

IPSWICH: WILLIAM HUNT, TAVERN STREET.

MDCCCLVIII.

LUKE III. 1–6.

1. Now in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Cæsar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judæa, and Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip tetrarch of Ituræa and of the region of Trachonitis, and Lysanias the tetrarch of Abilene,

2. Annas and Caiaphas being the High Priests, the word of God came unto John the son of Zacharias in the wilderness.

3. And he came into all the country about Jordan, preaching the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins.

4. As it is written in the book of the words of Esaias the prophet, saying, The voice of one crying in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.

5. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be brought low; and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways *shall be* made smooth:

6. And all flesh shall see the salvation of God.

THESE verses describe the beginning of the Gospel of Christ. It began with the preaching of John the Baptist. The Jews could never say, that when Messiah came, He came without notice or preparation. He graciously sent a mighty forerunner before His face, by whose ministry the attention of the whole nation was awakened.

Let us notice first, in this passage, *the wickedness of the times when Christ's Gospel was brought into the world*. The opening verses of the chapter tell us the names of some who were rulers and governors in the earth, when the ministry of John the Baptist began. It is a melancholy list, and full of instruction. There is hardly a name in it which is not infamous for wickedness. Tiberius, and Pontius Pilate, and Herod, and his brother, and Annas, and Caiaphas, were men of whom we know little or nothing but evil. The earth seemed given into the hands of the wicked. (Job ix. 24.) When such were the rulers, what must the people have been?—Such was the state of things when Christ's forerunner was commissioned to begin preaching. Such were the times when the first foundation of Christ's church was brought out and laid. We may truly say, that God's ways are not our ways.

Let us learn never to despair about the cause of God's truth, however black and unfavourable its prospects may appear. At the very time when things seem hopeless, God may be preparing a mighty deliverance. At the very season when Satan's kingdom seems to be triumphing, the "little stone, cut without hands," may be on the point of crushing it to pieces. The darkest hour of the night is often that which just precedes the day.

Let us beware of slacking our hands from any work of God, because of the wickedness of the times, or the number and power of our adversaries. "He that observeth the wind shall not sow, and he that regardeth the clouds shall not reap." (Eccles. xi. 4.) Let us work on, and believe that help will come from heaven, when it is most wanted. In the very hour when a Roman emperor, and ignorant priests, seemed to have everything at their feet, the Lamb of God was about to come forth from Nazareth, and set up the beginnings of His kingdom. What He has done once, He can do again. In a mo-

ment He can turn His church's midnight into the blaze of noon day.

Let us notice, secondly, in this passage, *the account which St. Luke gives of the calling of John the Baptist into the ministry*. We are told that, "the word of God came to John, the son of Zacharias." He received a special call from God to begin preaching and baptizing. A message from heaven was sent to his heart, and under the impulse of that message, he undertook his marvellous work.

There is something in this account which throws great light on the office of all ministers of the Gospel. It is an office which no man has a right to take up, unless he has an inward call from God, as well as an outward call from man. Visions and revelations from heaven, of course we have no right to expect. Fanatical claims to special gifts of the Spirit must always be checked and discouraged. But an inward call a man must have, before he puts his hand to the work of the ministry. The word of God must "come to him," as really and truly as it came to John the Baptist, before he undertakes to "come to the word." In short, he must be able to profess with a good conscience, that he is "inwardly moved by the Holy Ghost" to take upon him the office of a minister. The man who cannot say this, when he comes forward to be ordained, is committing a great sin, and running without being sent.

Let it be a part of our daily prayers, that our churches may have no ministers excepting those who are really called of God. An unconverted minister is an injury and burden to a church. How can a man speak of truths which he has never tasted? How can he testify of a Saviour whom he has never seen by faith, and never laid hold on for his own soul? The pastor after God's own heart, is a man to whom the word of God has come. He runs confidently, because he has tidings. He speaks boldly, because he has been sent.

Let us notice, lastly, in this passage, *the close connection between true repentance and forgiveness*. We are told that John the Baptist came "preaching the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins." The plain meaning of this expression is, that John preached the necessity of being baptized, in token of repentance, and that he told his hearers that except they repented of sin, their sins would not be forgiven.

We must carefully bear in mind, that no repentance can make atonement for sin. The blood of Christ, and nothing else, can wash away sin from man's soul. No quantity of repentance can ever justify us in the sight of God. "We are accounted righteous before God, only for the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ, by faith, and not for our own works or deservings." It is of the utmost importance to understand this clearly. The trouble that men bring upon their souls, by misunderstanding this subject, is more than can be expressed.

But while we say all this, we must carefully remember that without re-

penitance no soul was ever yet saved. We must know our sins, mourn over them, forsake them, abhor them, or else we shall never enter the kingdom of heaven. There is nothing meritorious in this. It forms no part whatever of the price of our redemption. Our salvation is all of grace, from first to last. But the great fact still remains, that saved souls are always penitent souls, and that saving faith in Christ, and true repentance toward God, are never found asunder. This is a mighty truth, and one that ought never to be forgotten.

Do we ourselves repent? This, after all, is the question which most nearly concerns us. Have we been convinced of sin by the Holy Ghost? Have we fled to Jesus for deliverance from the wrath to come? Do we know anything of a broken and contrite heart, and a thorough hatred of sin? Can we say, "I repent," as well as "I believe?" If not, let us not delude our minds with the idea that our sins are yet forgiven. It is written, "Except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish." (Luke xiii. 3.)

NOTES. LUKE III. 1-6.

- 1.—[*Ituræa, Trachonitis, Abilene.*] These were districts lying to the north and north-east of Palestine.
- 2.—[*Annas and Caiaphas being high priests.*] We know, from the Bible, that there could not, properly speaking, be two high priests at the same time. The office, in the best days of Israel, was held by one man, and held for life. But in the time of our Lord's earthly ministry there seems to have been much irregularity connected with the high priest's office, and the Romans probably deposed some from it for political reasons. The result was that there were frequently others beside the actual high priest still living, who had filled the office before. Annas was father-in-law to Caiaphas. (John xviii. 13.)
- 5.—[*Every valley shall be filled, &c.*] These and similar expressions in this verse must certainly receive a figurative interpretation. It is no literal pulling down of mountains, or filling up of valleys, that is here meant. The sense of the prophecy evidently is, that difficulties and obstacles as great as mountains and valleys in the way of a king's march, shall go down before the progress of the Gospel of Christ.
- 6.—[*All flesh shall see, &c.*] This is a prophecy which is not yet fully accomplished. It is to receive its completion when the kingdom of Christ is fully set up at His second advent, and all know Him from the least to the greatest. It is one among many examples, that the prophets of the Old Testament often spoke of both advents at once, and foretold the complete victories of the second appearing of Jesus, in the same breath with the partial victories of His first appearing. Some began to "see the great salvation" as soon as the Gospel was first preached. A little flock was taken out at once. All shall finally see the salvation of God from the least to the greatest.