

# EXPOSITORY THOUGHTS. ON THE GOSPELS.

FOR FAMILY AND PRIVATE USE.

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

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LUKE III. 15–20

15 And as the people were in expectation, and all men mused in their hearts of John, whether he were the Christ, or not;	thoroughly purge his floor, and will gather the wheat into his garner; but the chaff he will bum with fire unquenchable.
16 John answered, saying unto them all, I indeed baptize you with water; but one mightier than I cometh, the latchet of whose shoes I am not worthy to unloose; he shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost and with fire:	18 And many other things in his exhortation preached he unto the people.
17 Whose fan is in his hand, and he will	19 But Herod the tetrarch, being reprov'd by him for Herodias his brother Philip's wife, and for all the evils which Herod had done,
	20 Added yet this above all, that he shut up John in prison.

WE learn, firstly, from these verses, *that one effect of a faithful ministry is to set men thinking*. We read concerning John the Baptist's hearers, that "the people were in expectation, and all men mused in their hearts of John, whether he were the Christ, or not."

The cause of true religion has gained a great step in a parish, or congregation, or family, when people begin to think. Thoughtlessness about spiritual things is one great feature of unconverted men. It cannot be said, in many cases, that they either like the Gospel, or dislike it. But they do not give it a place in their thoughts. They never "consider." (Isaiah i. 3.)

Let us always thank God when we see a spirit of reflection on religious subjects coming over the mind of an unconverted man. Consideration is the high road to conversion. The truth of Christ has nothing to fear from sober examination. We court inquiry. We desire to have its claims fully investigated. We know that its fitness to supply every want of man's heart and conscience is not appreciated in many cases, simply because it is not known. Thinking, no doubt, is not faith and repentance. But it is always a hopeful symptom. When hearers of the Gospel begin "to muse in their hearts," we ought to bless God and take courage.

We learn, secondly, from these verses, *that a faithful minister will always exalt Christ*. We read that when John saw the state of mind in which his hearers were, he told them of a coming One far mightier than himself. He refused the honour which he saw the people ready to give him, and referred them to Him who had the "fan in his hand," the Lamb of God, the Messiah.

Conduct like this will always be the characteristic of a true "man of God." He will never allow anything to be credited to him, or his office, which belongs to his divine Master. He will say like St. Paul, "we preach not ourselves, but Christ Jesus, the Lord, and ourselves your servants for Jesus' sake." (2 Cor. iv. 5.) To commend Christ dying, and rising again for the ungodly,—to make known Christ's love and power to save sinners,—this will be the main object of his ministry. "He must increase but I must decrease" will be a ruling principle in all his preaching. He will be content

that his own name be forgotten, so long as Christ crucified is exalted.

Would we know whether a minister is sound in the faith, and deserving of our confidence, as a teacher? We have only to ask a simple question, Where is Christ in his teaching?—Would we know whether we ourselves are receiving benefit from the preaching we attend? Let us ask whether its effect is to magnify Christ in our esteem? A minister who is really doing us good will make us think more of Jesus every year we live.

We learn, thirdly, from these verses, *the essential difference between the Lord Jesus and even the best and holiest of His ministers*. We have it in the solemn words of John the Baptist:—“I indeed baptize you with water:—He shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost.”

Man, when ordained, can administer the outward ordinances of Christianity, with a prayerful hope, that God will graciously bless the means which he has Himself appointed. But man cannot read the hearts of those to whom he ministers. He can preach the Gospel faithfully to their ears, but he cannot make them receive it into their consciences. He can apply baptismal water to their foreheads, but he cannot cleanse their inward nature. He can give the bread and wine of the Lord’s Supper into their hands, but he cannot enable them to eat Christ’s body and blood by faith. Up to a certain point he can go, but he can go no further. No ordination, however solemnly conferred, can give man power to change the heart. Christ, the great Head of the Church, can alone do this by the power of the Holy Ghost. It is His peculiar office to do it, and it is an office which He has deputed to no child of man.

May we never rest till we have tasted by experience the power of Christ’s grace upon our souls! We have been baptized with water. But have we also been baptized with the Holy Ghost.—Our names are in the baptismal register. But are they also in the Lamb’s book of life?—We are members of the visible Church. But are we also members of that mystical body of which Christ alone is the Head?—All these are privileges which Christ alone bestows, and for which all who would be saved must make personal application to Him. Man cannot give them. They are treasures laid up in Christ’s hand. From Him we must seek them by faith and prayer, and believing we shall not seek in vain.

We learn, fourthly, in these verses, *the change that Christ will work in His visible Church at His second appearing*. We read in the figurative words of His forerunner, “that he will thoroughly purge his floor, and gather the wheat into his garner; but the chaff he will burn with fire unquenchable.”

The visible Church is now a mixed body. Believers and unbelievers, holy and unholy, converted and unconverted, are now mingled in every congregation, and often sit side by side. It passes the power of man to separate them. False profession is often so like true, and grace is often so weak and

feeble, that, in many cases, the right discernment of character is an impossibility. The wheat and the chaff will continue together until the Lord returns.

But there will be an awful separation at the last day. The unerring judgment of the King of kings shall at length divide the wheat from the chaff, and divide them for evermore. The righteous shall be gathered into a place of happiness and safety. The wicked shall be cast down to shame and everlasting contempt. In the great sifting day, every one shall go to his own place.

May we often look forward to that day, and judge ourselves, that we be not judged of the Lord. May we give all diligence to make our calling and election sure, and to know that we are God's "wheat." A mistake in the day that the floor is "purged," will be a mistake that is irretrievable.

We learn, lastly, from these verses, that *the reward of God's servants is often not in this world*. St. Luke closes his account of John the Baptist's ministry, by telling us of his imprisonment by Herod. The end of that imprisonment we know from other parts of the New Testament. It led at last to John being beheaded.

All true servants of Christ must be content to wait for their wages. Their best things are yet to come. They must count it no strange thing, if they meet with hard treatment from man. The world that persecuted Christ will never hesitate, to persecute Christians. "Marvel not if the world hate you." (1 John iii. 13.)

But let us take comfort in the thought that the great Master has laid up in heaven for His people such things as pass man's understanding. The blood that His saints have shed in His name will all be reckoned for one day. The tears that often flow so freely in consequence of the unkindness of the wicked, will one day be wiped from all faces. And when John the Baptist, and all who have suffered for the truth are at last gathered together, they will find it true that heaven makes amends for all.

#### NOTES. LUKE III. 15–20.

14.—[*Mused.*] The word so translated is generally rendered "reasoned."

15.—[*I indeed baptize with water.*] We must not fail to observe that the contrast John the Baptist draws here, is not, as the Roman Catholic writers say, between his baptism and Christian baptism, but between his power as a mere man to administer an outward ordinance, and the power of Christ the Son of God to affect the heart.

We must be careful that we do not underrate the value of John's baptism. We have no proof that any of the apostles ever received any other baptism than that of John. To say that the baptism of Christian ministers always confers grace, "*ex opere operato*," and that the baptism of John never conferred grace, is to say what cannot be proved either by Scripture or experience. The value of John's baptism is well defended by Brentius, in his Homilies on this chapter. Spanheim ably discusses the whole question, and concludes that the distinction between the baptism of John and the baptism of Christ was "not essential but accidental,"

that is, not in its essence but in its accidents or circumstances.

[*Baptize with fire.*] The meaning of this expression is doubtful, and has never been fully cleared up. Some confine it entirely to the descent of the Holy Ghost on the day of Pentecost, when “cloven tongues like as of fire” sat upon each person present on the occasion. (Acts ii. 3.) Others confine it entirely to the converting operation of the Holy Ghost, purifying and refining the heart as fire purifieth gold. Both views are probably included.

- 19.—[*But Herod, &c.*] The mention of John’s imprisonment in this part of St. Luke’s Gospel, before the event actually took place, is a striking example of St. Luke’s mode of “writing in order.” (Luke i. 3.) He is on the subject of John the Baptist and his ministry, and he therefore takes occasion to explain how that ministry was brought to an end, before turning to another subject.