



John the Baptist



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Part One

It might well be supposed that our Lord's forerunner was no ordinary man. Before assenting to that idea, it is necessary to determine what is meant in that connection by "no ordinary man." If it implies that John must have been one of social prestige and prominence, a highly educated and learned man, possessed of more than average talents, then, a serious doubt at once enters our mind, for it accords not with what is revealed elsewhere of the thoughts and ways of Him which are so different from ours. "The LORD seeth not as man seeth; for man looketh on the outward appearance, but the LORD looketh on the heart" (1 Sam. 16:7). He is pleased to choose "the foolish things to confound the wise" and "the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty: and base things of the world, and things which are despised...that no flesh should glory in his presence" (1 Cor. 1:27-29)—the primary reference being to His ministers, and the wider application to His saints in general. Thus, the ambassadors of Christ were for the most part unlettered fishermen, and when the Messiah appeared, he had no form nor comeliness in the sight of men.

Nevertheless, from the spiritual and divine side of things, the above expectation *was* fully realized. The one appointed to introduce the Saviour unto Israel was the subject of Old Testament prediction. He came from exceptionally pious parents. His very name was given to him by an angel before his conception (Luke 1:13). He was filled with the Holy Spirit from his mother's womb (Luke 1:15). His mission was a unique one. Yea, we are fully warranted in saying that God conferred upon him higher honours than on any other of the sons of men either before or since. He was "the prophet of the Highest" and sent "before the face of the Lord to prepare His ways" (Luke 1:76). He was the first administrator of the holy ordinance of baptism (and accordingly is named "the Baptist"), and had the great privilege of

baptizing the Lord Jesus. It was announced that “He shall be great in the sight of the Lord” (Luke 1:15), and blessedly was that fulfilled, for he was most eminently characterized by “a meek and quiet spirit, which is in the sight of God of great price” (1 Pet. 3:4). In that respect, as in many others, he was closely conformed unto Him who was “meek and lowly in heart.”

There are a number of striking paradoxes in the career of John which are deserving of mention. Though both of his parents were of the tribe of Levi, and his father an officiating priest (Luke 1:5), yet, he himself filled no ecclesiastical position and was never seen in the temple. Though his task was such a momentous one, there is no hint that he was trained in any of the schools of earth or that he consorted with men of letters. Instead, we are informed that he “was in the deserts till the day of his showing unto Israel” (Luke 1:80). Though he was appointed to make the Messiah “manifest to Israel” (John 1:31), instead of using Jerusalem for his headquarters, his sphere of operations was the wilderness! Though invested with such high dignity, nevertheless, his garb was of the meanest and his food the plainest. Though a prophet and filled with the Holy Spirit, yet, he performed no miracles. Though his mission and ministry were of such deep importance, yet, they began and ended within the space of a few weeks! Though he was highly esteemed by the multitudes, yet, he ended his days in prison, and God suffered the one who had so faithfully discharged his duty to be beheaded.

Luke 1:5 records a situation which must have deeply exercised the hearts of the godly remnant then to be found in Israel. Their beloved land was in the hands of enemies. The throne was occupied by a heathen—the wicked Herod then being king of Judaea. Long centuries had passed since any of the seed of David had wielded the sceptre. It looked as though JEHOVAH had ceased to be gracious. But the saints walk by faith, and not by sight. God’s sure Word, and not that which appears to outward sight, is the ground of their confidence, the basis of their hopes, and the comfort of their hearts. Faith may indeed be sorely tested, patience tried to its limits; the vision may tarry long, but in God’s

good time, it is certain of realization. It has been so all through the past, it was then—it will be so to the end of human history. Those words, “And at midnight there was a cry made, Behold, the bridegroom cometh; go ye out to meet him” (Matt. 25:6) enunciate a principle which has received frequent fulfilment, “Weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning” (Psa. 30:5).

Against that dark background of Herod’s being king of Judaea, we are told, “A certain priest named Zacharias, of the course of Abia: and his wife was of the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elisabeth. And they were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless” (Luke 1:5-6). Those were the parents of John the Baptist, and profoundly significant were their names. Zacharias means “JEHOVAH remembers.” How blessed! Our own memories are treacherous, and those about us are often forgetful, but not so the omniscient One. And *what is it* that He particularly “remembers?” The name of Zacharias’s wife tells us, for Elisabeth means “The oath of God.” Ah, *that* is what JEHOVAH never forgets, never falsifies, never fails to execute. Of old, He declared, “I have made a covenant with my chosen, I have sworn unto David my servant, thy seed will I establish for ever, and build up thy throne to all generations” (Psa. 89:3-4). “And God remembered his covenant” (Exod. 2:24), when the children of Israel were groaning under their Egyptian bondage. In the days of the Judges, they provoked Him, and He brought them low for their iniquity, yet, “He remembered for them his covenant, and repented according to the multitude of his mercies” (Psa. 106:42-45). That He kept His covenant was Daniel’s comfort in Babylon (Dan. 9:4), so too Nehemiah’s (Neh. 1:5).

It was the covenant “ordered in all things and sure” (2 Sam. 23:5), which the Lord now remembered—the next step unto the fulfilment of which He was about to perform. This is abundantly clear from what follows in Luke 1. First, the words of the Saviour’s mother to Elisabeth after she had been informed of her own supernatural conception and upon visiting her cousin, “He

hath holpen his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy,” which is explained by what immediately follows. “As he spake to our fathers, to Abraham, and to his seed for ever” (Luke 1:54-55). And second, the language of Zacharias himself, “Blessed be the Lord God of Israel; for he hath visited and redeemed his people... to perform the mercy promised to our fathers, and to remember his holy covenant; the oath which he sware to our father Abraham” (Luke 1:68, 72-73). It is not without reason that the Spirit has informed us that Zacharias was a priest “after the course of Abia” for a reference to 1 Chronicles 24:10 (“Abijah” is the Hebrew form of Abia, and means “Jah is father”), shows that his was the *eighth* of the twenty-four, and in the language of scriptural numerics, it is the number which speaks of a new beginning—a new dispensation was now dawning not only for Israel, but for the whole world.

The testimony borne to the parents of the Baptist shows that they were of exceptional piety, “They were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless” (Luke 1:6). That does not mean they were morally perfect, for “There is not a just man upon earth, that doeth good, and sinneth not” (Eccl. 7:20). “Righteous before God” signifies that they were saved souls. More specifically, they were righteous both legally and experientially—justified by faith in Christ, had received a holy nature at regeneration. But more—they supplied proof thereof—not merely by words, but by their works. Note the *uniformity* of their conduct. They not only complied with the divinely appointed “ordinances” of worship, but also performed the moral “commandments.” They not only approved themselves unto God, but they led exemplary lives before men, so that none could charge them with open sin. They were heedful of their ways, and, therefore, were kept from proving an occasion to others of stumbling. Their *walk* was highly honouring to God, for their lot was cast in a day of sadly low spirituality, and not of revival. Nevertheless, divine grace was sufficient for them. Ponder Philippians 2:15!

“And they had no child, because that Elisabeth was barren, and

they both were now well stricken in years” (Luke 1:7). The barrenness of Elisabeth was emblematic of the condition of her nation at that time—though very punctilious in ceremonial formalism, there was no fruit for God—nor could there be, until His might sovereignly and graciously interposed. A situation existed which was altogether beyond the capacity of man to remedy. Elisabeth was not only barren, but “in her old age” (Luke 1:36), so that, like Sarah of yore, her womb was now dead. Thus, there must be a supernatural operation from on high if she was to bear a son. The spiritual truth which is here illustrated is not only of deep importance, but plainly set forth. A power above and beyond that of mere nature has to come in before there can be any deliverance from the surrounding darkness and dearth, and any real revival of godliness be set in motion. Genuine servants of God are not the product of human might, natural wisdom, or earthly training. Instead, they are heaven’s gift. Divinely raised up and supernaturally called and qualified, fitted and empowered by the Holy Spirit. That is why God’s people are bidden, “Pray ye therefore the Lord of the harvest, that He will send forth labourers into His harvest” (Matt. 9:38). Yet how little is that heeded today!

Next, we are told that while Zacharias was officiating in the temple, an angel of the Lord stood on the right side of the altar of incense, saying to 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. And thou shalt have joy and gladness, and many shall rejoice at his birth” (verses 13-14). Valuable instruction is there here for us. Zacharias did not allow the appalling state of Judaism, nor the disappointing barrenness of his wife, to fill him with despondency and despair. Instead, he continued to serve the Lord, and to wait upon the throne of grace. So in this present day of declension and darkness, even though to carnal reason the situation appears to be hopeless, it is our responsibility to adhere steadfastly to the discharge of duty and to make known our requests unto God. Here, too, is real encouragement for us; the harbinger of Christ was given in answer to supplication! The incident now before us records one of

the many examples contained in the Scriptures for our comfort. It illustrates the need of importunity in believing prayer. No doubt Zacharias had often besought God to give him a son, yet, apparently his petitions were in vain. But it is written, “Men ought always to pray, and *not to faint*” (Luke 18:1). Now he received assurance that his petition was granted, “Continue in prayer, and watch in the same with thanksgiving” (Col. 4:2).

“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 Spirit, even from his mother’s womb. And many of the children of Israel shall he turn to the Lord their God. 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” (Luke 1:15-17). First, Christ’s forerunner should be “great in the sight of the Lord,” employed by Him in most eminent service, signally honoured by the unique position accorded him. Second, he was to be a total abstainer from liquor all the days of his life, which means that he was to be a “Nazarite” (Num. 6:1-3) or one “separated,” wholly devoted unto God, which was a signal honour for his parents (Amos 2:11). Third, his being filled with the Holy Spirit from being conceived was the divine appointing and anointing of him to the prophetic office (compare Jer. 1:5). Fourth, he would be abundantly successful in his mission, for he would be instrumental in the conversion of many, and thereby prepare them to receive Christ for themselves when He appeared. He was to be named John, which means “The favour of God,” and many would rejoice at his birth (Luke 1:58), so that in this respect, too, he was another Isaac, producing the “laughter” of joy. “He was a distinguished favourite of heaven, and a distinguished blessing to the earth” (Matthew Henry).

And what was the response made by the recipient of this blessed and wondrous revelation from the celestial messenger? Was Zacharias overwhelmed with wonderment and praise unto God for such favours? Alas, far from it. He was full of doubts and fears. “And Zacharias said unto the angel, Whereby shall I know

this? for I am an old man, and my wife well stricken in years” (Luke 1:18). That is very sad and solemn. Though definitely assured, “Elisabeth *shall* bear thee a son” (Luke 1:13), he questioned it, being occupied entirely with the difficulties of the case, and was sceptical about the good news communicated to him. This also is recorded for our instruction—as a warning for us to take to heart. It is a tragic reminder that unbelief still lurks within the hearts of the saints, and needs to be sternly resisted. It gives point to that exhortation, “Take heed, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief, in departing from the living God” (Heb. 3:12). The chastening hand of God now fell upon the priest. Let us see in God’s striking Zacharias dumb for his unbelief (verse 20) what a grave offence it is to supplicate the throne of grace and not expect an answer. Still graver to receive a promise from Him and, then, turn from it in unbelief. Those lips which ought to be employed in thanksgiving were now silent—the Lord will not use the mouths of those who distrust Him.

But despite the scepticism of Zacharias, in due time (Luke 1:57), the divine promise *was* fulfilled—“If we believe not, yet he abideth faithful: he cannot deny himself” (2 Tim. 2:13)—and the child was born unto him. His birth was extraordinary, due to the direct intervention of God, and therein it, too, “prepared the way of the Lord.” As Matthew Henry pointed out, it was “*next* to miraculous, so that the people might be prepared to receive and believe a virgin’s bringing forth of a son, which was *perfectly* miraculous.” Another link in the wondrous operations of divine providence had been supplied, and the unborn babe leaped in his mother’s womb as he heard the salutation of Mary (Luke 1:41). What proof was this that he was then “filled with the Holy Spirit!” The relations and neighbours gathered together at the happy event. *They* wanted to name the child after his father, but his mother insisted that he should be called John—“God’s gift.” Signs were made to Zacharias and he confirmed his wife. Whereupon the chastening hand of God was at once removed, speech was restored to him again, and he praised the Lord (Luke 1:59-66). When natural inclinations were subordinated to spiritual

considerations, communion was recovered!

The immediate sequel is very blessed. “Zacharias was filled with the Holy Spirit, and prophesied” (Luke 1:67). Most important is the practical lesson therein inculcated. Now that Zacharias had righted the wrong and was back again in full fellowship with the One whose word he had doubted, the Holy Spirit was morally free to use him as His messenger. That is the key to that oft-quoted, but little-understood, petition of the contrite Psalmist, “O LORD, open thou my lips; and my mouth shall show forth thy praise” (Psa. 51:15). David had been smitten with spiritual dumbness by his sad fall, and until God sealed his pardon, there could be no peace in his heart or praise from his lips. It was a request that God would unstop his shame-silenced mouth. It was a further evidence of David’s deep penitence that he desired to present again an offering of thanksgiving. As he was forgiven, restored, and became a happy worshipper, so Zacharias was now lifted entirely above himself, giving expression to God-honouring language which has been preserved unto this day. His inspired song became an imperishable part of Holy Writ, and the father of the Baptist was numbered among the “holy men” who, of old, “spake as they were moved by the Holy Spirit” (2 Pet. 1:21).

Filled with the Spirit, Zacharias was given discernment to perceive that which was hidden from those who were wise and prudent in their own esteem. He had spiritual understanding of the times. He knew that the long-promised Redeemer was at hand, that a mighty Saviour was being raised up (Luke 1:68-69). He realized that God was on the point of fulfilling the everlasting covenant (Luke 1:72). He recognized that God’s redeemed would serve Him “in holiness and righteousness” (Luke 1:75). He understood that the son which had been given to him was the predicted forerunner of the Messiah (Luke 1:76). He apprehended that salvation is entirely of the Lord, that He alone can give light to those in darkness, and “*guide* our feet into the way of peace” (Luke 1:79).

Part Two

The grand mission of this eminent character was clearly

announced by the word of prophecy centuries before he appeared upon the stage of human history. Its nature and design were defined by Isaiah and Malachi, and later by an angel, “The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God” (Isa. 40:3). That those words pertain to John is evidenced by the Holy Spirit’s application of them to him in each of the first three Gospels, and by his own express appropriation of the same in John 1:23. There was a peculiar propriety in designating him “the voice,” for that is to be heard and not seen. His mission was addressed solely to the ear and in no wise to the eye, for he wrought no miracles. Therein it differed from that of his Master—note the “see” in Matthew 11:4. But more particularly, as the voice is the medium by which the message is enunciated, so the Baptist was but the instrument to proclaim Him who is *the Word* itself. He was “the voice of him that *crieth*,” not whispereth or muttereth—publicly, fervently, powerfully, importunately, as he preached repentance and proclaimed the advent of the Saviour.

“Crieth in the wilderness.” What a position for the Messiah’s forerunner to occupy! Surely the place that befitted him was *Jerusalem*. Such indeed ought to have been the case, for not only was the temple—the grand centre of divine worship—situated there, but it was also the site of the royal residence, “the city of the great King” (Matt. 5:35). But spiritual conditions precluded any such thing. John was sent to a nation that had grievously departed from JEHOVAH. Judaism was but a hollow shell. Its ritual was maintained, but there was no life and reality. Pharisaism and Sadduceeism were in the saddle. The masses were blind to their awful condition before God, boasting that they were the children of Abraham, yet neither exhibiting his faith nor bringing forth his works. It was, therefore, in perfect keeping with their moral state that the sphere of John’s ministry was in the desert rather than in the temple courts, for God would not condone their pride and self-righteousness, nor own their formality and hypocrisy. His messenger was, therefore, assigned a place *outside* the apostate camp (Heb. 13:13), later ministering in

the vicinity of the Jordan. The “wilderness” symbolized the spiritual barrenness of all around him.

“Prepare ye the way of the Lord.” In olden times, when a king or some eminent person was about to visit a place, a herald preceded him, announcing his coming and making the necessary arrangements for his entertainment. Such was the honourable task assigned John. He proclaimed to Israel the approach of Christ as the Lord their God. A spiritual preparation was necessary ere the kingdom of Christ could be set up. “Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low: and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough places plain” (Isa. 40:4). That described in figurative language the process of preparation. Those who were bowed down by a sense of their guilt, and made little in their own eyes, should be raised up; but the haughty and self-sufficient should be humbled; that which was obscure in the typical rites would be understood, mysteries would be cleared. John prepared his Master’s way by disposing men’s minds for His person and message, particularly by his calling upon them to repent. When the ministry of John had inclined the hearts of many for the reception of the Messiah and had engaged the attention of the people at large, Christ appeared and John soon disappeared. “This my joy therefore is fulfilled. He must increase, but I must decrease” (John 3:29-30), he declared—as the morning star vanishes when the sun has risen.

“And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together: for the mouth of the LORD hath spoken it” (Isa. 40:5). God’s design in the sending of John and the mission of the Messiah—as in all His other works in creation, providence and grace—was the manifestation of the divine glory. But in order to make way for the display of that glory in Christ and His salvation, there must be the blighting and blasting of all that glory wherein man boasts. The flesh was made to appear in its true nature, as corrupt and having sentence of death upon it, so that the grace of God should alone be exalted. “The voice said, Cry. And he said, What shall I cry? All flesh is grass, and all the goodness thereof is as the flower of the field: the grass

withereth, the flower fadeth: because the spirit of the LORD bloweth upon it: surely the people is grass” (Isa. 40:6-7). That expresses, in figurative language, what was to be the burden of the Baptist’s message and the work the Spirit should accomplish through him.

John’s ministry was but a preliminary one. His task was not that of sowing and planting, but of ploughing and harrowing, a preparing of the ground for the Gospel seed. He was not a builder, but a hewer down. What a shattering word was his to the religious leaders, “O generation of vipers, who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come?...And now also the axe is laid unto the root of the trees: therefore every tree which bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire” (Matt. 3:7, 10). He was called to oppose a carnal Judaism, and expose its vain pretensions. He was sent to arouse and alarm a deluded nation, to humble their pride, to blow upon their worldly expectations, to show the need of a *spiritual* redemption. John’s commission was not to foster, but to dispel their hopes of a restoration of Judaism, the freeing of Palestine from the invader, and the re-establishment of the throne of David. Christ would procure for His people something infinitely better than Palestine, even an eternal inheritance. The transitory economy of Moses would be displaced by the enduring Christian dispensation. The former, in which the Jews gloried, had served its purpose, and “that which decayeth and waxeth old is ready to vanish away” (Heb. 8:13).

The character of John’s mission and ministry was further described as “He shall go before him in the spirit and power of Elias” (Luke 1:17). So closely did he resemble the Tishbite, that in the language of prophecy, he was actually denominated Elijah (Mal. 4:5-6 and see Matt. 11:13-17; 17:10-13). Elijah appeared at a time when Israel was being dominated by an alien, when the nation’s spirituality was at an appallingly low ebb, and only an insignificant remnant remained true to God. Similar was it in the days of John. Elijah came not with a message of grace on his lips, but rather of judgment, enforcing the righteous claims of God. Stern as the prophet of Gilead, the work of Christ’s forerunner

was to level mountains and lay low every lofty imagination. Each of them was a man of retirement from the world, a denouncer of those in high places, an uncompromising rebuker of sin. The one was clad in similar garb to the other (2 Kings 1:8; Matt. 3:4) and subsisted on equally plain fare.

“Behold, I will send my messenger, and he shall prepare the way before me: and the LORD, whom ye seek, shall suddenly come to his temple” (Mal. 3:1). That was the divine answer to the contemptuous question of Mal. 2:17. The promised Messiah was about to appear in judgment, though not to condemn and destroy, “For judgment I am come into this world, that they which see not might see; and that they which see might be made blind” (John 9:39). But before He was publicly manifested, John opened the door for Him (John 10:2-3). By office, John was a “messenger,” his mission was to prepare Christ’s way. Observe that the herald was our Lord’s (for the “my” refers to Christ), sent by Him, thereby showing His authority in the sending forth of His ministers. His superiority to John, His existing before him—all so many proofs of His deity. Hence, the prefatory, “Behold,” to fix attention upon and intimate the importance of what follows, to arouse the nation. Christ would appear “suddenly” after His forerunner had accomplished his task.

“Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD [in A.D. 70, when the temple was razed, Jerusalem trodden down of the Gentiles, and the Jews scattered to the four winds]. And he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers, lest I come and smite the earth with a curse” (Mal. 4:5-6). That was still another Old Testament prediction regarding Christ’s harbinger. John was not Elijah in person (any more than Ezekiel 34:23 has reference to the literal David, or Revelation 2:14, 20 to the literal Balaam and Jezebel), but he came in the spirit and power of that prophet, to perform an Elijah-like work. There was a great likeness in their mission and circumstances, their austerity of living, courage, and integrity in rebuking vice, holiness of life, zeal in the cause of God, and in both being feared

and persecuted by the reigning king. That the above prophecy referred to John is unmistakable from Luke 1:17, “He was to go before the Lord for the purpose of effecting a reconciliation between the degenerate seed of Israel and their pious forefathers—making them again of one heart and soul, so that the fathers might not be ashamed of their children, nor the children of their fathers: in a word, that he might effect a real reformation by turning ‘the disobedient [offspring] to the wisdom of the just [ancestors]’” (Patrick Fairbairn, 1805-1874).

After describing the extraordinary circumstances which attended his birth, excepting in Luke 1:80, nothing is told us about John until his work began. He drank neither wine nor strong drink, being mortified to all of earth’s pleasures. It was at the age of thirty that he appeared, for that was the time of entrance upon office (Num 4:3; Luke 3:23). “In those days came John the Baptist, preaching in the wilderness of Judaea, and saying, Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matt. 3:2). The “kingdom of heaven” signifies that sphere where the rule of God is professedly owned, being in contrast with the kingdom of Satan (Matt. 12:29). It is the Gospel dispensation, which is entered by a confession of repentance and faith. The demand for repentance shows it was a *spiritual* kingdom. To call upon the Jews to repent was the denouncing of their self-righteousness and confidence in ceremonialism. Repentance is the soul passing sentence of unsparing judgment upon itself, a bowing to God’s verdict of its lost and ruined condition, owning itself to be dead in sin. By taking their true place before God, they would be prepared to receive Christ.

Matthew 3:4 describes his dress and food. As Christ had no form nor comeliness in the sight of men (Isa. 53:2), so His forerunner was mean in the eyes of the world. He was homely in his attire, frugal in his diet, being wholly intent on matters of more importance. Thereby, he exemplified his teaching. He could but mourn over a condition of things without God. His very food and dress called for fasting and mourning. His baptism confirmed his preaching, for it was one “of repentance” and in the Jordan—

the river of death. Those who responded to his call came “confessing their sins” (Mark 1:5), of which death was their due. “Ye must die and be buried, even as He who is to come will save by death and burial. This was the meaning of the emblem which he set before the crowd” (C. H. Spurgeon).

Ere passing on, it requires to be pointed out that the mission of John exemplified one of the “ways” usually employed by God with souls in preparing them to receive the Gospel. That was intimated in Isaiah 40:7, “The Spirit of the LORD bloweth upon it.” There is a withering work of the Spirit before a comforting one. The pride of man has to be abased ere the grace of God is exalted. It is the Spirit’s office to convict of sin, and when He does so the comeliness of the flesh is blighted, its beauty fades as the flower, all our righteousnesses are seen as filthy rags, and boasting is silenced. The Spirit wounds before He heals, breaks to pieces before He mends, calls to repentance before He says, “Behold, the Lamb of God” (John 1:29). Christ will never be precious to those who are pleased with themselves. Only the sick welcome the physician. We have to discover our filthiness ere we cry, “Wash me” (Psa. 51:2). We have to see ourselves as utterly undone and driven to self-despair ere we value the Gospel.

Attracted by the novelty, great multitudes flocked to John’s preaching and were baptized by him. But instead of rejoicing, the religious leaders of that day were displeased, regarding him as an interloper. A deputation of priests and Levites was sent from Jerusalem to ask, “Who art thou?” (John 1:19). He had not been trained in their schools, and was outside all denominations. Whence then had he received his authority? Who had commissioned him to preach and baptize? One can readily surmise the contemptuous tone of their “Who art *thou?*”—confirmed by his reply, “He confessed, and denied not” (John 1:20). He refused to be intimidated by them, boldly standing his ground. Not satisfied, they continued to interrogate him until they asked, “What sayest thou of thyself?” (John 1:22). A searching question! The answer to which revealed his state of heart. He might have replied, “The most remarkable character God ever

raised up to Israel,” or, more modestly, “The son of Zacharias the priest.” Instead, he merely said, “I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness” (John 1:23). Thus, he answered in the language of Scripture, and indicated that his office was vested with divine authority.

A real trial had been made of John’s sterling character by those officials, but a still more exacting test of his piety soon followed. “Then cometh Jesus from Galilee to Jordan unto John, to be baptized of him” (Matt. 3:13). This was the One of whom he had testified, “He that cometh after me is mightier than I, whose shoes I am not worthy to bear” (John 1:27). That was said by John before the multitude at the height of his fame. But so far from being puffed up by the dignified position he occupied and the high esteem in which he was held, he was not ashamed to own that he felt himself utterly unfit to perform the meanest service for such an august Person. Suitable representative of One who was “meek and lowly in heart” (Matt. 11:29) was this modest and diffident forerunner. “But John forbad him, saying, I have need to be baptized of thee, and comest thou to me?” (Matt. 3:14). He was completely overwhelmed by the unique honour that Christ would confer upon him. “And Jesus answering said unto him, Suffer it to be so now...Then *he suffered him*” (Matt. 3:15). For praiseworthiness, that act of obedience deserves to be ranked with Abraham’s offering up of his son Isaac.

John’s final testing came soon afterwards at the hand of Herod. That king heard him preach and was deeply impressed (Mark 6:20). Instead of feeling flattered and fawning upon him, John faithfully rebuked him for cohabiting with his brother’s wife (Mark 6:18). That gave great offence to the tetrarch, who cast him into prison—it is no new thing for God’s ministers to suffer ill for doing well. The world ever hates those who testify that its works are evil. While languishing in prison, the faith of John wavered (Matt. 11:2-3), for there has been only One who was “without blemish and without spot” (1 Pet. 1:19). As Matthew Henry remarked, “Where there is true faith, yet there may be a mixture of unbelief.”

The outstanding grace in John was his *lowliness*, for the most eminent saints have ever been the most humble. Lovely climax to his modesty was his “He must increase, but I must decrease” (John 3:30)—willing to be eclipsed that Christ might be all. Blessed is it to behold the Lord honouring the one who so honoured him, “Among them that are born of women there hath not risen a greater than John the Baptist: notwithstanding he that is least [we strongly prefer “less” as all the older versions rendered it] is greater than he” (Matt. 11:11), for the Son of God took a still more lowly place—“I am a worm, and no man” (Psa. 22:6). And again He testified of John, “He was a burning and a shining light” (John 5:35) in doctrine and deportment, full of zeal for God, and love for souls. Burning inwardly, shining outwardly. He hid not his light under a bushel, thus leaving the Jews without excuse.

