

DAILY BIBLE ILLUSTRATIONS

by

John Kitto, D.D., F.S.A.

Thirty-Second Week -- Wednesday

THE MINISTRY OF JOHN THE BAPTIST

"John came baptizing in the wilderness and preaching a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins. Then all the land of Judea, and those from Jerusalem, went out to him and were all baptized by him in the Jordan River, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel's hair and with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. And he preached, saying, 'There comes One after me who is mightier than I, whose sandal strap I am not worthy to stoop down and loose. I indeed baptized you with water, but He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit'" (Mark 1:4-8).

At length the time arrived when the Word of God came to John in the solitude of the wilderness, where he had no doubt long brooded over the iniquities of the times, over the prospect of the Messiah's kingdom, and over the precise nature of that mission to which he knew he had been nominated, though not yet called to its actual duties. That "Word" made clear to him all that he needed to know. It not only taught him what to do and that the time was come for him to do it, but it inspired him with all the energies and powers needed for the fit discharge of the high and solemn office to which he was called.

John now no longer shunned the haunts of men but moved towards the inhabited districts of, or bordering on, the wilderness towards Hebron and lifted up his voice to "preaching the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins." This region was, however, ill suited for the administration of the rite from which he derived his name of Baptist, or rather Baptizer, to large numbers of people. There were here but a few scanty streams, dried up in summer. The nearest large body of water was the Dead Sea. But the borders of this lake were mostly rugged and precipitous, and the natural feeling, and still more the religious awe, of the people would have shrunk from the idea of performing sacred ablutions in these pungent, saline, unwholesome, and accursed waters.

John therefore moved northward proclaiming his mission and drawing crowds after him as he went. At length he reached the great national river. It was not only the sole important stream in the land but also the scene of the Lord's mighty acts of old, and thus was in all respects suitable for the purpose the Baptizer had in view. He took his station here, most usually at Bethabara, the ford of the Jordan, which tradition pointed out not only as the spot where the waters divided to let the hosts of Israel pass, but as the point where the waters parted when smitten by the

mantle of his great prototype Elijah. Here the immediate shores of the river afforded many objects of picturesque beauty, though the adjacent country was wild and desert.

The news of John's appearing, his preaching, and his baptism spread quickly through the land, and from every quarter people of all ranks and sects hurried to the Jordan and thronged with deep interest and high-wrought curiosity around him, gathering up with eagerness the strong words that fell from one who spoke with all the boldness and authority of a man who felt himself invested with a Divine commission. He seemed to renew in his person the interrupted race of the ancient prophets, silent for more than four hundred years, and whose very appearance reminded them of the rude garb and mortified demeanor of Elijah and other seers of old.

He proclaimed loudly that "the kingdom of heaven" was at hand--the long expected Messiah would speedily appear. And he exhorted them to prepare their souls for his coming, assuring them that God would thoroughly sift his people and that the unworthy would have no part in the kingdom about to be established. He denounced as false and ruinous the prevalent opinion that descent from Abraham and the observance of outward ceremonies were the only requisites for admission to the rights and honors of that kingdom, and exhorted men of all classes and characters to true repentance as the one essential preparation. He was appointed to make ready a people prepared for the Lord, and he employed baptism as a symbol of preparatory consecration to the Messiah's kingdom.

But when the Pharisees, who in their self-righteousness acknowledged no need of repentance, came to him for simple baptism, John repelled them with stern indignation and reproof until they also should repent and evince their repentance by their conduct. And to rebuke their reliance upon their Abrahamic descent as the *one* essential qualification, he gave them the strange and startling intimation that the benefits of the Messiah's reign were not necessarily limited to the chosen race, for God was able from the very stones upon the river's bank to raise up children unto Abraham. By this he clearly meant to tell them that if the Jews disgraced their descent, God would remove his kingdom from them and impart it unto strangers--a doctrine of all others the most exasperating to the class of people he then addressed.

But the true penitents who came to John found in him a kind and condescending teacher. He gave them no vague and high-sounding words but adapted his instructions with minute care to their special conditions and circumstances. On the people he inculcated mutual charity; on the publicans (tax-gatherers) justice; on the soldiers of Herod Antipas (who were then passing that way on an expedition against the Arabian king Aretas) humanity and abstinence from all unnecessary violence and pillage.

These requirements of John appear very moderate in comparison with those of Christ, who demanded at the very outset an absolute surrender of the will and the affections. This difference, as Neander well remarks, arose naturally from the different positions which they occupied. John was fully conscious that the moral regeneration that was indispensable to

admittance into the Messiah's kingdom could only be accomplished by a Divine principle of life; and knowing that to impart this was beyond his power, he confined himself to a *preparatory* purification of the morals of the people. Thoroughly understanding his true position and the nature of his office, he felt he was, as the humble instrument of the Divine Spirit, called not to *found* the new creation but to *proclaim* it.

Although there had been no greater prophet, no greater man born of woman, he is never for an instant exalted above measure into a forgetfulness of his really subordinate and comparatively humble office. Convinced that he was inspired of God to prepare and not to create, he never pretended to work miracles, nor did his disciples (as strongly as they were impressed by him) ever attribute miraculous powers to him,