

THE HUMILITY OF JOHN THE BAPTIST.

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He must increase, but I must decrease.—
John iii: 30.

JOHN THE BAPTIST had great reason to think highly of himself. He was a priest, a prophet, the predicted herald of the Messiah, and the spiritual leader of his nation. As a priest, descended on both sides from the consecrated family of Aaron, he belonged to the highest caste in the chosen kingdom of Jehovah. At the same time a prophet, like Jeremiah and Ezekiel, he not only held the highest rank, but, by special appointment, he belonged also to that singular order which transcended all rank. *As the authorized representative of God, he revealed the mysteries of heaven to the children of earth. But, by the divinest testimonies, we know that he was even more than a prophet. He was himself the subject of prophecy. Like Isaac and Samuel, he was the child of miraculous promise. An angel heralded his birth, announced his name, and foretold his wonderful career. Isaiah and Malachi had predicted him as the forerunner who should come in the spirit and power of Elijah, to disclose at last the secret of the ages; and he came, bringing joy and gladness, to strike the hour for which so many weary centuries had waited, to point out the very *Man* for whom so many longing generations had watched.

His life, too, was worthy of his mission. In a world composed largely of hypocrites and sensualists, he kept the lowly vows of a Nazarite from his birth. He ate the coarse fare which nature provided, he wore the rough garment of the ascetic, and he spent years in the solitary wastes of the wilderness, communing with the Holy Spirit: his sphere was too high and peculiar to be shared with the crowds of common men. Then, at the fit time, the greatness of his mission and the majesty of his character were acknowledged by multitudes whom he turned back to the Lord

their God. Pharisees and publicans, Sadducees and peasants, the Sanhedrim and the longsuffering people, all alike flocked to hear his vehement words of warning and his startling promise of the approaching King. From the fleshly Tetrarch on the throne to the thoughtless soldier in the camp, men trembled before his fierce summons to repentance; for John was gifted with the inspiration of the Almighty, and his words mastered human hearts, as the hurricane sweeps through the trees of a wood.

Now, in this marvelous origin and character was there no ground for pride? John's generation was full of men who were proud of their birth, proud of their position, proud of their character, proud of their success, proud of their very pride itself! Was John not a *man*, that, with incomparably better excuse for pride, he should feel no pride at all? His own disciples grew jealous and angry when they saw his influence waning before that of One whom he had baptized. It made them envious to see men turning away from their master and beginning to seek Jesus. But with sublime humility John saw his own glory paling before the rising glory of another, not only without bitterness, but with hearty complacency and joy. In all his transcendent greatness there seems now to lurk no taint of earthly egotism, and in the text he proclaims a sentiment which exceeds the inherent powers of fallen man: "*He must increase, but I must decrease.*"

Beggared as we are of such signal humility, it becomes us to inquire how John attained to this unworldly standard of self-abnegation? How did he conquer self and become, like his Master, meek and lowly in heart?

It should be noticed at the outset that, whatever means he used, he did not become humble by mere self-abasement. He makes no allusion to the fastings and vigils in the solitude of the desert. These doubtless had their uses as a protest against the degeneracy of the times, and as a preliminary preparation of his own heart: but they