

INTERNATIONAL S. S. LESSON.

Sunday, Feb. 13.

PREACHING OF JOHN THE BAPTIST.—Luke 3: 7-18.

GOLDEN TEXT:—Bring forth, therefore, fruits meet for repentance; and begin not to say with yourselves, we have Abraham to our father, for I say unto you that God is able of these stones to raise up children unto Abraham.

Commit—15-17.

INTRODUCTION AND CONNECTION.

A period of about eighteen years intervened between the events of our last, and those of our present lesson.

During this long period Jesus had been leading a quiet, laborious life at Nazareth, ripening mentally and spiritually for the work that lay before Him; and John, a dweller in the deserts, (ch. 1: 80,) had, in silence and solitude, given up his youth and maturer years to the study of God's Word and devout meditation upon the kingdom and coming of Him whose herald he undoubtedly knew he was to be. Thus, to both Jesus and John, the years had glided away until God's time had fully come; and then John, moved by the Holy Ghost, issued from his solitude, to rouse, by his bold and fearless preaching, the whole nation to the eager expectation of the speedy coming of the Messiah; and Jesus, a few months later, also Spirit-led, came forth from His obscurity, to begin the great work which was so soon to be finished on the cross.

LESSON NOTES.

(7.) *The multitude*—that is, the Pharisees and Sadducees (Mark 3:7) *that came to be baptized of him*. They were the two great, influential, yet rival, schools or parties, into which the Jews were at that time divided, and in which the greater number of the learned and influential men were found.

Most of these were expecting the Messiah; but none of them had any idea of such a Messiah as God was about to give them. They looked for a temporal deliverer who should free them from the Roman yoke, and re-establish in Jerusalem the throne and kingdom of David; and, under whom, the Jews should rise to great power and influence. *Were baptized*—some of them, doubtless, in sincere repentance; yet the greater portion were probably moved to present themselves for baptism in the hope of being, by this means, rendered more eligible to honor and preferment under an earthly sovereign. *Generation of vipers*—poisoners. The viper is a poisonous reptile whose bite, in hot countries, is deadly. John called the Pharisees and Sadducees vipers, because of the character of their teachings—poisonous to the morals of their disciples. Our Lord exposes some of their doctrines (Matt. 5.) He uses the same language towards them Himself, and for the same reason—(Matt. 12:34; 23:33). *Who hath warned you?*—given you the hint, or brought you hither? plainly hinting that there coming was from selfish considerations rather than true penitence—*to flee from the wrath to come*—God's judgments upon the impenitent—(Ps. 9:17; 11:6).

(8.) *Bring forth*, etc., equal to saying,—let the reality of your repentance appear in your lives in fruits meet, or suitable to it, that is, in lives fruitful in the sincerity and meekness of practical godliness. *Began not to say*, etc., in other words, boast not of your natural descent from Abraham; for unless you have the faith and faithful life of Abraham, your boast is empty and false. Abraham's true children are *spiritually* like him; and none others have any right to call themselves such.

If He does not find you such, *He is able to raise them up out of these stones*. Possibly, by stones, the Gentiles are meant; still, the words are as easily understood in a literal as in a figurative sense, for either involves the miraculous power of God.

(9.) *And now the axe is laid* (placed, ready for use) at the root of the trees—"an impressive figure," says Dr. Brown, "of impending judgment, only to be averted in the way next described"—that is, by the repentance which produces fruit unto holiness.

The threatened judgment is that of being *heaven down and cast into the fire*. By this is meant *individual*, rather than *national* destruction.

(10.) What shall we do?—that is, to prove the reality of our repentance; in other words, what are the *works* that are really the fruits of repentance?

(11.) This is in answer to *the people*—he

that hath two coats and he that hath meat, let them impart to him that hath none. A most comprehensive answer, for under its general provision—that of imparting to others the good we enjoy which they have not—our whole duty to our fellow-men is comprehended.

(12.) *Then came publicans* (tax-gatherers) *to be baptized*. These men were also professing repentance and a preparation of heart to meet Christ; so they also ask *what shall we* (as publicans) *do?*

(13.) John's answer was short and simple—*Exact no more than that which is appointed you*. This, in a publican, would be, perhaps, the clearest proof of genuine repentance, for, as a class, they were odious for their extortion and injustice.

(14.) *And the soldiers demanded*, *What shall we* (as soldiers) *do?*—and the answer cuts as closely at their prevailing vices as the answer to the publicans at theirs. (1) *Do violence to no man*. This has no bearing upon their duties, as soldiers, to their king and officers; but to the terrorism and injustice they exercised over the people among whom they were,—such as violence and intimidation, for the sake of securing money or profit. (2) *Neither accuse any falsely*—alluding to their practice of acting as informers, telling falsehoods about others through selfish and interested motives. (3) *Be content with your wages*. Alluding, probably, to the prevalent custom among them of rebellion and mutiny in the hope of being offered gifts or bounties by their officers, in order to pacify and bring them back to obedience.

(15-16.) *All men mused*, etc., (secretly considered, queried) of (concerning) *John, whether he were the Christ or not*. *John answered, saying unto all*—*I, indeed, baptize you with water, but one, etc.*—"the mightier than I" *cometh, the latchet of whose shoes* (sandals) *I am not worthy to unloose*. Had not John been a true servant of God, he would probably have availed himself of his great popularity to raise himself to prominence; but with a beautiful humility he hastened to remove the false impression that prevailed. No; he was not *the Christ*; he was so much beneath Him as to be unworthy to render Him the most menial service—that of unfastening the latchet of His sandals, or, (Matt. 3:11) bearing them after Him. *He shall baptize*, etc. This clause is contrasted with *I, indeed, baptize*, etc., showing the immeasurably greater dignity of Christ's work than of his own.

The baptism Christ would give to His people was the *reality* of that of which John's baptism was only the symbol; and in proportion as the work was greater than his must the worker be greater than he. As is substance to shadow, so was Christ to John, and Christ's baptism to John's baptism. *And with fire*. This clause is usually supposed to imply the purifying and cleansing work of the Holy Spirit; but if so it could apply to only one class of John's hearers. Possibly the true sense is—(1)—the fiery trials and persecutions that were to try those who believed in Christ; (Luke 12:49; John 15:20;) and—(2)—the fiery judgments that should come upon those that would reject Him (Ps. 11:6) and thus his words will apply to both classes of his hearers.

(17.) *Fan*—the instrument then in use for separating chaff from grain. *In His hand*—for judgment (John 9:39) whenever His own time should arrive to use it. *Floor*—literally the place where grain was threshed. *Purge His floor*—His visible church—at that time the Jews. He would purge away the chaff—the wicked, (Ps. 1:4,) so that the true grain, His own people, might be manifest. *Gather the wheat* (His saints) *into His garner* (heaven, John 17:24) *but the chaff* (the ungodly) *He will burn with fire unquenchable* (Mark 9:44).

(18.) *Many other things*...preached he. This is but a passing glance at the teaching of John. Of all his many sermons and private talks, the few utterances recorded by the evangelists are all that have been given us. Like the words of Jesus, what has been deemed by the Spirit sufficient for us has been given—all else has been withheld.

SUGGESTED THOUGHTS.

John's humility is an illustrious example. While exalting Christ to the highest dignity, he styles himself only a voice: proclaiming in the wilderness Christ's coming; he is *not* the Bridegroom, he is only THE FRIEND of the Bridegroom; he is *not* Christ, he is only the one that MUST DECREASE while his Lord INCREASES.

The three great points in John's preaching are—REPENT, BEHOLD THE LAMB OF GOD, and, HE SHALL BAPTIZE YOU WITH

THE HOLY GHOST AND WITH FIRE; the first is a command, the second an exhortation, the third a prophecy. The first embodies the duty of all men, the second the privilege of all men, the third the reward of all men.

QUESTION SUMMARY.

(FOR THE CHILDREN.)

(7.) Who are particularly meant by *the multitude*? See Matt. iii. 7. What is a *viper*? Why did John call the Pharisees and Sadducees vipers? See note. What did John tell them to *flee* from? What does that mean? How could they *flee* from God's judgments? Are all who *flee* to Christ safe? (8.) What is meant by *fruits worthy of repentance*? Pious lives and holy characters. What did John tell them they need not *say*—that is, boast of? Why not? Because Abraham had *faith*, and they had not. That showed they were not Abraham's children. What did he say God was able to do? (9.) What is meant by *the axe*? God's judgments. What is meant by its being *laid at the roots* of the trees? That they are ready and waiting for the wicked, and may fall on them *at any moment*. How will God sometime use that terrible axe upon unfruitful trees—that is, wicked men? (10.) What did *the people* ask? (11.) And what did John say? Did John mean any thing besides clothes and food? (12.) Who were *the publicans*? What did he tell them to do, to show their repentance? Would that be different from what they generally did? See note. (14.) What did he tell the soldiers to do? What does each of those rules mean? See note. (15.) Whom did the people begin to fancy John was? (16.) What did John say he was not worthy to do for Christ? What did he say Christ would do? (17.) What will Christ do with His wheat—that is, His saints? What is meant by *His garner*? Read John 17:24. What will He do with the chaff—that is, the wicked? Read Mark 9:24. Which of those two classes do *you* belong to?

THE OUTLOOK FROM THE END OF GENESIS.

At eventide, in the patriarchal era, there was light; but very soon the light fades away, and darkness settles down—the darkness of Egyptian night. Jacob dies. Joseph dies. The children of Israel disappears from view, and when we find them again in the first chapter of Exodus, we find them in the degradation of slavery.

Where are the promises now—those glorious promises that were made to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob? Not only are they unfulfilled, but there is no sign of their fulfilment.

Where is the promise of the land? There is not a patriarch's tent in the whole of it now. The Canaanite has undisputed possession of every part. Where are the altars that were raised by Abraham, Isaac and Jacob? The Amorite may desecrate them as he will. There is no one to guard them or enclose them from sacrilegious tread. Even the grave at Machpelah, that Abraham bought for a large sum of money, is deserted and dishonoured now. There is no one to plant even a flower on the once sacred spot. Where is the promise of the land?

And where is the promise of the seed that was to bring salvation? Joseph seemed as if he were to fulfil the promise when he came into power in Egypt and had all things under his control. But Joseph is dead now, and another Pharaoh has arisen who knows not Joseph, nor cares for Joseph's race. As to the promise of "the great nation" and the "many nations," there are no signs of any nation at all.

Thus all the promises seem gone, and what is left? A few words and a few bones. That is really all that is left of the rich promises of Genesis—a few words of Jacob, and a few bones of Joseph; words of Jacob that have gone out into the empty air and seem to be lost forever; bones of Joseph that are dead, with no appearance of a resurrection. That is the end. What a miserable ending of all the sacrifices and the

hopes of "the father of the faithful"! Miserable wreck of the Gospel in Genesis! Of all that has interested us and excited expectation, nothing now remains that can be seen but Joseph's bones.

But with these bones is linked a word of God, on the faith of which the dying Joseph had spoken these words of calm assurance: "God will surely visit you, and ye shall carry up my bones from hence." The bones were dead, but the words were living. It was that word of God which "liveth and abideth forever." And therein lay the hope of the covenant. When we come to the close of the book, we are looking into a coffin, the narrow grave of Genesis. But as we look, we see it opening into the wide portal of Exodus. It is with this old tomb of Joseph as it is with the new tomb of him of Arimathea. The one seemed the grave of the old covenant, and the other seemed the grave of the new. But while the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea seemed the grave of Christianity, was it not indeed the gate of all its glory? So it is with the embalmed remains of Joseph in their narrow Egyptian coffin. Here we have the link between Genesis and Exodus. Joseph's bones bridge the dark chasm between them. There, on the Genesis side, they mark the end of the beginning, and a miserable end it seems; but they carry us over on the Exodus side, to the beginning of the end, and how glorious that end is doth not appear, until, after the long development of the ages, we reach the consummation in the glowing imagery of the Apocalypse.

Observe here the lesson which comes from comparing the directions given by Jacob concerning his bones, with those given by Joseph. Jacob says, "Bury me not in Egypt. Bury me with my fathers in the cave that is in the field of Machpelah." It was a very natural thing in the old man, as all his holiest feelings were with the Canaan of the past. Canaan was to him a memory and a grave. But Joseph's Canaan was different. It was the Canaan of the future—not a memory and a grave, but a hope and a home. And that is the reason why the directions of Joseph concerning his bones are spoken of in the eleventh of Hebrews as a special exercise of faith. Joseph says in effect: "Keep my bones in Egypt. Ye shall carry them indeed to Canaan, but not in a mere funeral procession, as the bones of my father have gone. In triumph, not in sadness, shall they go; not as to a grave in a cave, but as to the broad and beautiful land of promise."

Each charge was beautiful in its time. When Jacob died, all was bright. Witness the gorgeous funeral and the mourning among the Egyptians. When Joseph died, all was getting dark. Years had elapsed. The night of slavery was already settling down. No notice seems to be taken in Egypt of the death of the old and almost forgotten Joseph. The lesson of each is appropriate and memorable. When the world is at its brightest, forget not the grave. Such is the lesson of Jacob's dying charge. When the world is at the darkest, forget not the home. Such is the lesson which the dying Joseph teaches. On the furthest verge of Genesis, we see two figures disappearing from our view—the one with his eye on the past, the other with his eye on the future. What is there in the field of vision? On this side, the memory of a tent—the prospect of a grave. On the other side—the side that Joseph looks to—God and His word, life, heaven, eternity.—*Rev. Jno. Munro Gibson, D.D., in "Ages before Moses."*

Reading aloud relieves weak and weary eyes.

A cup of hot water taken at bedtime is the best remedy for sleeplessness.