

Many a rough soldier, and many a crafty lawyer, and many a stern Saducee, have come to scoff, but stopped to pray ; and many have found out that the prophet Isaiah meant John the Baptist, by the voice that should cry in the wilderness to prepare the way of the Lord ; and that Malachi meant none other but he, but Elijah the prophet, who should come before the great day of Jehovah.

How bright the sun shines on the clear waters of the Jordan, for we are nearer now, and we can see it winding onward far away ! How strange the preacher looks, with his rough robe and fine sagacious face—how strange the throng that listen to his words ! many a man goes down into the water at the voice of him who preaches the baptism of repentance. One would not easily forget the scene. When the Israelites passed over and clustered round the ark—when Elijah smote the waters and divided them in twain—when Naaman the leper dipped in its waters seven times, and his flesh came again as the flesh of a little child, it was a strange and wonderful scene, but not one half so strange as John the Baptist preaching on its banks and baptising in its waters.

John the Baptist, as stern and true as old Elijah, stands there, and to the eager throng cries out, Repent ! He fears God, and nothing beside. His thoughts are on God, eternity, and judgment ; and life and death, and heaven and hell, and what are all the crowns, and thrones, and riches of the world to him ? You might guess by those strong words of his, by his earnest glance, by the sound of his voice, that he was sent of God. What does he say ?

“ O Generation of vipers, who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come ? ” how is it that you, who all your lifetime have been the enemies of God, who have broken his laws, despised his rule, refused his mercy, slighted his promises, scorned his threatenings, should now fly from the com-

ing judgment, from the anger of the great God, and the death that never dies ? Repentance is no easy matter : old things must pass away, all things become new, hard hearts must grow soft, stubborn wills must be subdued. “ Bring forth, therefore, fruits worthy of repentance, and think not to say within yourselves, We have Abraham to our father, for God is able of these stones to raise up children unto Abraham. The axe is laid to the root of the trees ; every tree which bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down and cast into the fire.”

We hear the questions that are asked by those about—What shall we do ? Be charitable, be upright, be honest, be contented. He that hath two coats, let him impart to him that hath none ; and he that hath meat, let him do likewise. Do violence to no man, accuse none falsely. We hear the busy murmur—“ Is this the Christ ? ” The throng that look upon him begin to think that in him they see their long expected King and Saviour. John has heard the question, and answers saying, “ I indeed baptize you with water ; one mightier than I cometh, the latchet of whose shoe I am not worthy to unloose ; he shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost and with fire.”

And this is the stern true man who is to die—to be shut up in prison by the wicked Herod—that head of his to fall by the headsman’s sword.

And so the day proceeds. The people are still listening—many groups are on the mountain side as the twilight draws near ; but one who has heard the preacher’s voice has come to his baptism. It is a stranger from Nazareth of Galilee—ah no, it is no stranger, for we recognise in him the child who, eighteen years before, had talked with the doctors in the Temple. It is Jesus, now about thirty years old, who has past a peaceful, labouring life, at Nazareth, all that time.