

Studies in Bible Biography—John the Baptist

Topic for January 7.

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Select Scripture lessons from the following passages:

1. SOME IMPORTANT EVENTS IN THE LIFE OF JOHN.

- (1) His birth foretold.—Luke 1: 5-25.
- (2) His birth.—Luke 1: 57-79.
- (3) Wilderness life.—Luke 1: 80; Mark 1: 4.
- (4) Preaches and baptizes.—Luke 3: 1-15.
- (5) Baptizes Jesus.—Matt. 3: 13-16.
- (6) Bears witness to Jesus.—Luke 3: 15-17; John 1: 19-28.
- (7) Introduces Jesus to his disciples.—John 1: 29-36.
- (8) Imprisoned.—Luke 3: 19, 20.
- (9) His doubts, and Jesus' testimony to him.—Matt. 11: 2-5.
- (10) His death.—Matt. 14: 1-12.

2. THE MOULDERING OF HIS CHARACTER.

Bishop Quayle says that there are four factors which go to make character—heredity, environment, self, God.

(1) *Heredity*—John was well born. He had an illustrious line of ancestors. Yet this was perhaps the least potent factor in the making of his character. So far as most of us are concerned if we were able to trace our genealogy back a few generations we might discover among our ancestors some whom we would not like to own. Their mental and moral qualities may have been transmitted to us. Yet we are not bound down by the characteristics of our ancestors. We are free agents. It is ours to develop within us the good that may have been transmitted to us by our fathers, and we are also to overcome the evil which in the same way we may have inherited. It is said that man is no mere creature of circumstances; much less is he the creature of an irreparable past. One of the greatest evangelists to-day was born in a gypsy tent. If a man can rise above circumstances, much more easily can he rise above hereditary influences.

(2) *Environment*.—This is a more important factor in the formation of a man's character. There is the environment of the home, of the school, of the church, of the community; all of which tend to make men what they are. John was highly favored in being brought up in a godly home under the direction and example of his pious parents. In that home God had a place, and sufficient time was doubtless found for family worship. No home is a model home where family worship is neglected. In this home the only son had been consecrated to the cause of God. One reason why there is such a dearth of men entering the work of the Christian ministry to-day in connection with all our churches is because the parents refuse to consecrate their children to the service of the Lord. The whole field of human activities is investigated with a view to finding out in what place and in what way the son of the home can make the greatest success in life; but with all the planning that is made for the future success of the son or daughter, the church and its needs are forgotten. John was favored in this respect. He was brought up right with God, and they planned aright for his life. He himself accepted the plans of his parents and carried them out. Great is the power of environment. Environment makes more criminals than heredity. The men who are languishing in our prisons were not born criminals; they were made criminals, and that largely by environment. The man who is not

well born, and is not well circumstantially morally, is handicapped. But over and above these powers there is the greater power of self, and the supreme power of God, by means of which he may rise above all other adverse influences and make of himself a man.

(3) *Education*.—John's chief text book was the Bible. The education of a Jewish youth could not be complete without a knowledge of the Scriptures. John's mind was filled with the teaching of God's Word. He seems to have been specially influenced by the prophecy of Isaiah. The prophet's expressions and images filled his mind and colored his own language. Such expressions as *generation of vipers, trees and the axe laid to the root, the threshing floor and fan, the fire, the bread and cloth*, are all traceable to Isaiah. The constant reading of the Bible moulded the thought and language of such men as Ruskin and H. M. Stanley. The Bible

introduced Him to his disciples. He denied that he was himself the Christ, but he bore testimony to Jesus, the One who was mightier than he.

The reader is asked here to examine for himself the character of John's preaching, how he struck at the sins of the time, and how he adopted his message to the various classes of hearers who came to him. The word that he spoke was a needed word, whether he spoke to the multitudes, the pharisees, the publicans, the soldiers, or to King Herod himself.

4. HIS IMPRISONMENT AND DEATH.

For the circumstances connected with the imprisonment and death of John, the reader is referred to Luke 3: 19, 20, and Matt. 14: 1-12. The leader of the meeting may rehearse the story of John's imprisonment and death as he finds it recorded in the gospels, and make whatever comments he thinks best.

While in prison John seems to have got into a doubting state of mind. He seems to have been made to outgrow life. His was an active nature that could not stand enforced confinement.

Somewhat discouraged by his experience of prison life, and by the darkness of the Kingdom of God in coming, he begins to wonder whether the Jesus whom he had pointed out as the Christ was after all the real Christ, or if he was to look for another. Certainly things were not coming to pass as he had expected. There were no signs yet of Jesus claiming the throne of David, or of his in any way asserting His royal prerogative. He had proclaimed Jesus to be the Messiah, but perhaps he had been mistaken. Doubts are filling his mind. These doubts that troubled John might be accounted for in two ways, first by the depression of spirits that comes from enforced confinement, and secondly by the inadequate and in some sense incorrect view which John

HERALDS OF THE KING

Blackboard Acrostic Lesson for Young People on John the Baptist.

Herald.—To be a herald of the King we must be as He was: *Heaven-born*.—The angel said, "thy prayer is heard" (Luke 1: 13). The supernatural in John's birth reminds us that we must be born from above" (John 3: 3, R. V.). Only those who can prepare the way for Christ. You must be converted.

Endowed.—"Filled with the Holy Ghost" (Luke 1: 15). God calls so ill you with His Spirit and power that you will be able to do all He wants you to do, overcome every temptation, and win many souls for Christ (verses 3, 6).

Refined.—"Great in the sight of the Lord" (Luke 1: 15; Matt. 11: 13). Through years of prayer and meditation he had become a most chaste and lovely character, incapable of a mean thought and low aims, and of harboring unholy desires.

Abstemious.—"Verily, I say, my meat was locusts and wild honey." He drank "neither wine nor strong drink" (Luke 1: 2). We shall never make efficient heralds of the King if we are always thinking of sweets and cakes, and toys, play and pleasure. You must learn to deny yourself.

Luminous.—"Sent to bear witness of that Light" (John 1: 8). Next to Christ, John was the brightest light in the world. He was so much like the Son of Lightness that almost everybody thought he was that light. He denied it (John 1: 20). He so filled with glory that he was round to be around, "as if only 'a little candle burning in the night'."

Downtrodden.—"Verily, I say, 'O generation of vipers.' We must not be afraid to reprove those around us when they use bad language, or do wrong things. Like John, we should warn solemnly, but lovingly. We must be faithful or Christ will never use us.

Self-sacrificing.—"He must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3: 30). He was willing not only to give all his disciples to Christ, but his life also (Matt. 14: 10). This is always the mark of the true herald. We care not what becomes of us, so long as Christ is glorified. Have you this unselfish spirit?—Ed.

should be the chief factor in the education of our leaguers.

(4) *His Wilderness Life*.—At what age John retired to the wilderness we do not know, but it was probably on the death of his parents. Thrown upon his own resources probably at an early age, he retired to the desert where he lived a free, independent, and rugged outdoor life. He would have time and opportunity for quiet meditation, for communion with God, and for the maturing of his plans as a preacher of righteousness to the people. His wilderness life tended to develop that independence of spirit which enabled him to denounce without fear, the sins of the people, and to reprove even the king himself.

3. JOHN'S WORK.

He was the forerunner of Christ, preparing the way for Him by preaching the doctrine of repentance so that the people might be prepared to receive the Kingdom and its benefits. He was the forerunner of Christ because he baptized Him, and

had of the kingdom. He failed to understand that the Kingdom of God was to be altogether a spiritual kingdom, and that it would therefore not come with the outward glory that marks the coming of a throne of an earthly monarch. He sends messengers to Jesus that he may have his doubts settled. Jesus asks these messengers to report to John what they had seen and heard, and from these facts he must come to his own conclusion. The coming of the Kingdom was marked by such signs as these which he saw and heard, the real wants of men were being met, and the poor had the gospel preached to them.

Jesus then bears his testimony to John. He was no mere reed shaken with the wind, no mere courtier dressed in gorgeous apparel; he was a prophet of God greater than any that had as yet appeared; and yet we who in simple faith accept Jesus as our Saviour and Lord may be greater than he—in point of privilege. John was a man with a character. He lived a preacher with a message. He lived a life with a purpose.