



LESSON II.—JANUARY 8.

The Witness of John The Baptist to Jesus.

John i., 19-34.

Golden Text .

Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world. John i., 29.

Home Readings.

Monday, Jan. 2.—John i., 19-34.

Tuesday, Jan. 3.—John iii., 22-36.

Wednesday, Jan. 4.—Mal. iii., 1-3; iv., 5, 6.

Thursday, Jan. 5.—Is. xl., 1-11.

Friday, Jan. 6.—Matt. xi., 1-15.

Saturday, Jan. 7.—Matt. xiv., 1-14.

Sunday, Jan. 8.—Rev. v., 1-14.

(By R. M. Kurtz.)

INTRODUCTION.

The present lesson is a continuation of the last. It might be cited as an example of the law of recurrence, for John has already spoken of the witness of John the Baptist to Christ, and now he gives it more in detail.

John the Baptist was six months older than Jesus, of whom he was a relative. He spent the early part of his life in retirement in the wilderness, doubtless in preparation for his mission as the forerunner of Christ. Then suddenly he appeared calling the people to repentance, baptizing them, and announcing the Messiah.

Now Malachi had prophesied that Elijah the prophet should come before the great and dreadful day of the Lord. Hence when John the Baptist came calling upon the people to repent, for the kingdom of Heaven was at hand, some were inclined to think that this was the Messiah, others that he was Elijah. This was the occasion for the inquiry with which our lesson opens.

John preached in the Wilderness of Judea, in the region west of the lower Jordan and the Dead Sea.

WHAT JOHN WAS NOT.

19. 'And this is the record of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, Who art thou?

20. 'And he confessed, and denied not; but confessed, I am not the Christ.

21. 'And they asked him, What then? Art thou Elias? And he saith, I am not. Art thou that prophet? And he answered, No.'

The preaching of John the Baptist caused no small stir in the country. Matthew tells us that the people came to him from Jerusalem, all Judea, and the region of the Jordan. For centuries the Jews had possessed prophecies of a coming Messiah, and at this very time Jewish patriots were longing for a deliverer to come, who might throw off the Roman yoke. It was a time of expectancy and anxiety. Suddenly there appears this strange and forcible preacher in the wilderness.

Could he be the Messiah? The Jews sent to inquire, 'Who art thou?' Then John answered directly, as though fully realizing the full meaning of their question, 'I am not the Christ.' Had he been an impostor, he could doubtless have had a great following at once by proclaiming himself the Messiah.

Then they inquired if he were Elias, that is, Elijah, foretold in Malachi. But this John denied. This may seem confusing in view of Christ's statement in Matthew xi., 14. But Christ refers to John as the figurative Elijah, while John seems to have realized that the people thought he might be literally Elijah returned in the flesh. Besides, this was not the coming of Elijah before the great and terrible day of the Lord, for that day is yet to be.

'Art thou that prophet?' refers to Deuteronomy xviii., 15. Moses was referring to the Christ as the great prophet whom God was to

raise up, and hence, when asked if he were this prophet, John promptly answered that he was not.

THE VOICE OF ONE CRYING IN THE WILDERNESS.

22. 'Then said they unto him, Who art thou? that we may give an answer to them that sent us. What sayest thou of thyself?

23. 'He said, I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, Make straight the way of the Lord, as said the prophet Esaias.

24. 'And they which were sent were of the Pharisees.'

John's answers to the questions asked by the messengers from the Pharisees are very direct and clear. He does not mystify them by answers in doubtful or vague terms, but says plainly that he is not such or such a one. Then plainly they ask, Who art thou? And John says, 'I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness,' etc., quoting the words of Isaiah xl. This was a prophecy familiar to them, and John presents himself as fulfilling it, being thus not the Messiah, but his forerunner. It was a custom in the East to have the road put in good order when the king was to pass over it, hence the occasion for one to go before to proclaim his coming.

John was calling men to repentance, to heart searching, to expectancy, that they might have their minds prepared to receive the Lord whose ministry was soon to open.

WHY DID JOHN BAPTIZE?

25. 'And they asked him, and said unto him, Why baptizest thou then, if thou be not that Christ, nor Elias, neither that prophet?

26. 'John answered them, saying, I baptize with water; but there standeth one among you, whom ye know not;

27. 'He it is, who coming after me is preferred before me, whose shoe's latchet I am not worthy to unloose.

28. 'These things were done in Bethabara beyond Jordan, where John was baptizing.

29. 'The next day John seeth Jesus coming unto him, and saith, Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world.

30. 'This is he of whom I said, After me cometh a man which is preferred before me: for he was before me.

31. 'And I knew him not: but that he should be made manifest to Israel, therefore am I come baptizing with water.'

If John was not Christ himself, nor Elijah, nor 'that prophet' the question arose, Why did he baptize with water, that is with the symbol of purification, indicating the repentance of the person baptized, for we are told that he baptized them 'in water unto repentance.' In this way he was specially preparing the way for Christ, calling upon men to repent, that their hearts might be more ready to receive him.

But though John was performing this ceremony, he called their attention from it to Christ himself, as one standing among them. These words are understood as spoken after the baptism of Christ, and John calls attention to the fact that there is one among them who is far above him, whose shoe he is unworthy to loosen. The next day he sees Jesus coming to him, and openly announces him as the 'Lamb of God,' using the figure of the sacrifice so familiar to the Jew as connected with atonement. He recalls his words of the day before and declares that this is the one to whom he referred.

Even he did not at first know Christ, but he knew that he should be made manifest to Israel, and therefore he was preparing the way for him.

JESUS REVEALED TO JOHN THE BAPTIST.

32. 'And John bare record, saying, I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it abode upon him.

33. 'And I knew him not: but he that sent me to baptize with water, the same said unto me, Upon whom thou shalt see the Spirit descending, and remaining on him, the same is he which baptizeth with the Holy Ghost.

34. 'And I saw, and bare record that this is the Son of God.'

Having explained that he, being the forerunner of Christ, and knowing that he was to be revealed, was baptizing men unto repentance, in preparation for this great event, John the Baptist now explains how Christ was revealed to him.

This experience was similar to that of Chris-

tians generally. At first he simply believed and obeyed, not having seen nor known Christ; then the Spirit showed Christ to him, that he might know him and commune with him; then he bore his testimony that this was the Son of God. The Christian life is a growth. At first we have simply faith and obedience, then comes a more perfect knowledge, and with that the ability to witness to the truth as we have known it. The Holy Spirit shows Christ to men still, fixing their attention upon him and calling upon them to believe and follow him. It remains for them to heed the gracious invitation.

Notice how John, the writer of this Gospel, takes such great pains to present Christ as the Son of God. He is most careful to make the fact prominent in the 34 verses we have been studying. In this lesson he takes up in detail the testimony of the appointment of forerunner of the Saviour, showing how he came to bare record as he did.

The lesson for January 15 is 'Jesus Wins His First Disciples.' John i., 35-51.

C. E. Topic.

Sunday, Jan. 8.—Topic—The making of a Christian: his birth. John iii., 1-8.

Junior C. E. Topic.

THE FIRST TWO COMMANDMENTS.

Monday, Jan. 2.—'The Lord thy God.' Deut. vi., 13, 14.

Tuesday, Jan. 3.—'They rejected his statutes.' II. Kings xvii., 15, 16.

Wednesday, Jan. 4.—'Ye have not hearkened.' Jer. xxv., 4-7.

Thursday, Jan. 5.—'How shall they hear?' Rom. x., 14.

Friday, Jan. 6.—'Ye ignorantly worship.' Acts xvii., 22-30.

Saturday, Jan. 7.—The greatest commandment. Matt. xxii., 37, 38.

Sunday, Jan. 8.—Topic—Two commandments and people who disobey them. Ex. xx., 1-6. (Missionary Meeting.)

Faithful Unto Death.

A worker in a sailor's mission recently related this story of heroism. One winter night a fireman on one of the ocean steamers stumbled in the darkness down into an open hatchway. He fell to the hold, broke his leg, and received other injuries. His outcry brought a group of stevedores to his help, and they were excitedly discussing what to do for him, when it became evident that he was trying to speak.

'Be quiet, boys,' said one of the men; 'maybe Jake's wanting to send a word home.'

But it was not of home poor Jake was thinking, even in that moment of agonizing pain. 'Tell the fifth engineer to look after the boiler!' he whispered.

What a splendid illustration of fidelity and courage! It was the same sort of fidelity that inspired John the Baptist, in the face of every opposition and danger, to loyally prepare the way for Jesus, and is a good story to suggest to each one of us the fidelity with which we should open the way for Christ into the hearts of our friends and neighbors.—'Christian Age.'

Rebuking Sin.

A story is told of one of our bishops who was induced as a young man to lead a changed life by an incident in a railway train. He, with other friends from the university, was making fun of religion, when an elderly gentleman interposed and protested against the Saviour being spoken of in such a light manner. The rebuke touched the heart of at least one of the young men, and he began forthwith to lead a new life. After study he entered the church, and rose to be a bishop and a leader of religion in this country. God desires that we should bear testimony against evil when we see it, and the rebuke may lead the evildoer to a change of life. Even if we fail, as John the Baptist, we shall at least know that we have done our duty, and our Heaven Father will reward us accordingly.

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