

PROPHETIC PREACHING

then and now

by

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CHAPTER NINE

PREPARING THE WAY OF THE LORD

"The next day John seeth Jesus coming unto him, and saith, Behold, the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world" (John 1:29).

The people of Jerusalem were milling around the streets in noisy excitement. "Have you heard about that sensational preacher down by the Jordan who is attracting such tremendous crowds to hear him?" Brother asked brother; neighbor spoke to neighbor; friend told friend. "Let us get on our donkeys and ride down to the Jordan to hear him. He is really getting people told about their sins," they said. The news was spreading like fire in the breeze.

John the Baptist had burst into the attention of all Judea. No prophet had been heard among the Jews since Malachi, about four hundred years before. The people knew that a genuine prophet had arisen. They knew by his likeness to Elijah whom they respected so highly, knew by the ring of sincerity in his voice, knew by the stinging directness with which he condemned sin, knew by the zeal and sense of urgency with which he appealed for repentance, knew by the widespread revival which he was leading so vigorously.

The people thought, "This man has come from GOD, this dynamic herald telling of the nearness of the Messianic kingdom for which our people have been looking for centuries." The complacent, dignified, proud old rulers at Jerusalem had been accustomed to people coming to them; this time they went out to see the fearless, dead-in-earnest preacher who sounded like he knew what he was talking about, and who believed what he was saying. He sounded like a man who had a message from GOD to proclaim to his generation. He was claiming that he was there to blaze out a royal highway for the Lord. People will go to hear a man like that, any time.

Characteristics of the Prophet John

If John the Baptist is to be a criterion for young prophets today, they must differentiate between his mannerisms and his spiritual characteristics.

John's camel-hair raiment and leather girdle would not be attractive in the First Church of a metropolitan area. Nor would wild honey and locust be on the menu in most places. Just so, it is not necessary to preach with such severity as John, nor to call people in church a brood of

rattlesnakes! These were mannerisms in keeping with John's personality, which were assets to him but would be liabilities to other preachers.

Prophets must be themselves, not mimics of the mannerisms of great men. When Billy Sunday was the most publicized evangelist in America, many "little Billys" all over the nation met their downfall by trying to mimic Sunday's acrobatic antics in the pulpit or the tongue-lashing tactics which he used on other preachers and deacons. CHRIST is the norm, the ideal - not some contemporary great man. Some phases of John's career cannot be duplicated, but their spiritual meaning can be interpreted and appropriated.

For example, not many can be born of a priestly line like John. His father Zacharias was a priest and his mother Elizabeth was a descendant of Aaron. But a young prophet is blessed if he has a noble heritage from godly forbears, and if he was reared in a Christian home.

Not every young prophet today can be reared among the silent solitudes of the mountains and prairies, like John was reared in the hill country of Judea. But every young prophet should take time to go alone with GOD for Bible study, meditation on the truth, prayer for the Spirit's guidance, and committal of himself to the will of the Father.

Not every young preacher can have a towering personality like John. But every God-called young man can try to think like a prophet, to live like a prophet, to pray like a prophet, and to preach like a prophet.

Many of the spiritual characteristics of John the Baptist must be built into the character and conduct of a prophet if he comes into mature usefulness. A prophet of GOD must not be a worshipper of popularity, like a reed blown in every direction by the varying winds of current popular opinions (Matthew 11:7-10). Nor should one be a pink-tea prophet dressed in silks and satins, currying favor with the privileged classes (Matthew 11:8). He must have character.

John the Baptist was more than a prophet. He was a man of GOD who had a Heaven-given commission to perform, and he was a man of action ready to do it.

John was called of GOD to deliver a message about the Messiah who was coming immediately to establish the Kingdom of Heaven. Every effective prophet has some great essential message running through all his messages. It seems that John was never unconscious of what his divinely-imposed task in life was, never for one moment did he forget it. He had no church building in which to preach, but since he was under divine compulsion to preach he began to cry in the wilderness. He preached with fervor and passion and power about the King and the kingdom (Matthew 3:1-3).

An out-door preacher like John the Baptist must attract the attention of the passing throng to compel people to stop and listen. He also must hold their attention or they will walk off and leave him. He must speak in the language of ordinary people, and use it with such clarity that all can understand both his words and his theme. The spiritual characteristics of the preaching of John may be used as a measuring rod for the qualities needed by preachers today.

His preaching "stabbed people awake" when they heard him.

He used sharp-pointed words of one or two syllables.

He employed vivid metaphors to illustrate his points.

- Fire!
- Judgment!
- Repent!
- Wrath is coming; flee!
- Offspring of snakes!
- Axe at the root of the trees!
- The threshing floor of GOD!
- Chaff to be burned! Unquenchable fire!
- The Messianic rule is at hand, as near as your right hand!
- Live right to prove that you have repented!
- Be baptized!

"We never heard such preaching before," thought the people.

In spite of his popular appeal, John was to become an all-time criterion for preachers in his humility and self-effacement. He vigorously denied that he was the Messiah. When JESUS began to gain popular favor, John immortalized himself by his utter lack of ministerial jealousy - that perennial temptation of preachers. When people began to tell John that JESUS was growing more popular than he was, he made the classic answer, **"He must increase, but I must decrease"** (John 3:30).

In his preaching John had a sense of urgency born of the belief that he had a life-and-death message from GOD. He preached that message with unwavering moral conviction and death-defying courage. Most significantly, John was inflamed with the indwelling Holy Spirit. This gave him a contagious enthusiasm which drew people to hear him and persuaded them to believe him. A man can always get some followers if he himself believes deeply enough in what he is preaching. John was what someone has called a Jesus-intoxicated man.

John's Heritage from Other Prophets

John the Baptist was the last of the Old-Testament-type prophets; he opened the door of the new era under CHRIST. It was inevitable that he should inherit many characteristics and qualities from the prophets of former centuries. GOD grant that present-day prophets may do the same.

John felt an overpowering sense of mission to fulfill the prophecy of Isaiah (Isaiah 40:3-5), that is, to build a royal highway of spiritual truth over which the Messiah should enter his ministry to men. He was convinced that he was the one prophesied by Malachi when he said, **"Behold, I will send my messenger, and he shall prepare the way before me"** (Malachi 3:1), that he was the promised Elijah (Malachi 4:5). A Christian today becomes gloriously useful when he is spurred on to work diligently at some clearly understood task, believing that he has a personal call of GOD to accomplish that task.

John's heritage from the older prophets was multiform. He was strikingly like Elijah in his

ascetic life, his eccentric dress, his sudden appearance, his severe preaching, and his fearless denouncement of the sins of royal persons.

- he was like Amos in his unrestrained and uncompromising cry against the social sins of his time.
- he was like Isaiah in foreseeing the atoning work of the Lamb of GOD (Isaiah 53:6-7).
- he was like Jeremiah, Hosea, Ezekiel, Jonah, and many others who preached unceasingly that the people must repent of sin.
- he was like Micah in his concern for people who were being defrauded or being treated violently.
- he was like Joel as he preached about the baptism of the Holy Ghost and of fire.
- he was like Zechariah who preached in plain, easily-understood, straight-from-the-shoulder, pointed language about ethics in daily living.
- he was more optimistic about the future than Zechariah, because the Messianic reign which Zechariah saw but dimly was "**at hand**" in John's time.

John's Message to Men, Then and Now

One of the persistent cries from the pew of today is for preaching that is relevant to the life of the listeners. Life is so full of vital questions and vexing problems; the Bible is full of applicable texts and revealing answers. John fitted the Old Testament Scriptures to every-day sins. No one ever accused John the Baptist of preaching "over the heads" of the congregation!

John's sermons had a vital doctrinal content, the kind of content without which no preaching can be truly great or permanently effective. He preached great doctrines such as the holiness of GOD, the sinfulness of sin, the inevitable judgment to come, the necessity for repentance, the call to obedience, the life of social righteousness, the glorious redemption through the Lamb of GOD, and the need for the baptism of the Holy Spirit. John put refreshing fruit around the doctrinal core of his sermons by making practical applications to the lives of his hearers.

He told those who were collecting taxes for the Roman government that they must be honest and fair to all. Today, he would tell men to tell the truth when making out their income tax returns.

He admonished the soldiers to refrain from cruel violence. Today, he probably would talk about the crime wave, social injustice, or race prejudice.

He demanded that rich people share their garments and wealth with the poor who had none. Today, probably he would talk about slum clearance, fair wages to share-croppers, education for needy children, and feeding the hungry in poverty-stricken lands.

He exhorted all to be content with their paychecks. Today, he would preach about righteousness between management and labor, about violence in strikes, and against crass worship of money.

John poured pitiless scorn on the nationally proud Jews who thought they were automatically born children of GOD merely because they were descendants of Abraham, and that, therefore, they were free from the judgment to come.

This was vital preaching. John demanded character, a character that was revealed by righteousness, a righteousness that proved the reality of repentance. He called for immediate decisions, public confessions and professions of faith, and baptism as a symbol of what was experienced in their hearts.

All of this vital and pointed preaching by John the Baptist led up to the ultimate objective of all prophetic preaching then and now, that is, preaching CHRIST and pointing men to him.

"Behold the Lamb of God!" cried the Baptist in excitement and exhilaration. This is the pinnacle of prophetic preaching.

John seemed to be conscious that he had reached the climax of all Old Testament prophecy when he directed men to look at the Lamb of GOD, the Messiah, the desired of all nations and ages. The torch of Messianic hope had been held up by the prophets through the centuries, burning brighter and brighter as the years came and went. It was as bright as sunrise when John pointed to JESUS and gave an exultant shout. To the prophets of today it is a light as brilliant as the noonday sun in an unclouded sky.

FOR BIBLE STUDY AND DISCUSSION

1. What is the New Testament meaning of the Kingdom of Heaven, or the Kingdom of GOD? Is there any difference between the two?
2. When John the Baptist was in prison why was he confused about who JESUS was (Matthew 11:3)?
3. What did JESUS mean (Matthew 3:11) about John being the greatest one ever born of woman, yet saying that the least in the Kingdom of Heaven would be greater than he?

(See John A. Broadus, *An American Commentary on the New Testament*, Vol. I Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1886. See A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, Vol. I., Sunday School Board, Nashville, 1930).

4. Did John purposely imitate the many prophets from whom he had so rich a heritage?
5. Are there times when certain sermons do not justify or call for any references to CHRIST?
6. What in this study has impressed you most, and has blessed you most?

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