

BIBLE CHARACTERS

by

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CHAPTER 11

JOHN THE BAPTIST

The contemplation of no Bible character quickens me more than the life and character of JOHN THE BAPTIST. I never touch that life but I get a blessing. I used to think that I should liked to have lived in his day, and in the times of some of the prophets; but I have given up that idea long ago: for when a prophet appears, it is when the priests have been unfaithful, religion is at a low ebb, and everything is in disorder and confusion. When John appeared it was as black as midnight. The Old Testament had been sealed up by Malachi's proclamation of the Lord's coming, and of the forerunner who should introduce Him.

With Malachi, prophecy ceased for four hundred years; then John came, preaching repentance and preparing the way for the dispensation of the grace of GOD. The word John means the grace and mercy of GOD. He looked back upon the past, and looked forward to the future. I will not dwell upon his birth, although it is interesting to read in Luke 1 the conversation of Gabriel with Zacharias, Johns father, when he was executing the priests office before GOD, and what took place when John was born. As in the case of JESUS, his name and his birth were announced beforehand. When John was born there was considerable stir but it soon died out. The death of CHRIST would have died out of men's recollection but for the HOLY GHOST.

Notwithstanding the wonders attending Johns birth, for thirty years he dropped out of sight. Many events had taken place during that period. The Roman Emperor had died; Herod, who had sought the lives of the young children when he heard that JESUS was born King of the Jews, was dead; the shepherds were gone: Simeon and Anna, the prophet and prophetess, were gone; the father of John the Baptist was gone; and all the rumors that were afloat at the time of Johns birth had died out and were forgotten, when all at once he burst upon the scene like the flashing of a meteor. There was a voice heard in the wilderness, and the cry came, Repent: for the kingdom of Heaven is at hand! There had been a long line of prophets. He was the last prophet of the Law; he was to close up that dispensation; he stood upon the threshold of the new age, with one foot upon the old and the other upon the new dispensation. He told them what had taken place in the past, and what would take place in the future.

All the Evangelists speak of John. Matthew says, In those days came John the Baptist preaching in the wilderness of Judea. Mark says, The voice of one crying in the wilderness, Prepare ye the

way of the Lord, make his paths straight." In Luke we read, The word of GOD came unto John, the son of Zacharias, in the wilderness. And John, the beloved, says, There was a man sent from GOD, whose name was John. That is the way in which these four men introduce him.

Another thing that stirred the people and moved them was his dress. It was like Elijah's, which was of camels hair, with a leather girdle. His preaching was like that of Elijah. No name could arouse the nation like Elijah's name. And when the news began to spread from town to town, and at last reached Jerusalem, that one had risen like unto Elijah in appearance and dress; that the eloquence of Heaven and the power of GOD were upon him; that he was a Nazarene from his birth; - when these strange rumors got abroad, the people flocked to hear him. It is remarkable that he never performed one miracle nor gave one sign, and yet he moved the whole nation!

People tell us that they do not believe in revivals. There never was a country moved so suddenly and awakened so quickly as was Judea under the preaching of John and JESUS CHRIST. Talk about sensational preaching! If by that term you mean preaching designed merely to impress the outward senses, then their preaching was not sensational; but if you mean preaching calculated to produce a striking effect, then it was indeed sensational. The greatest sensation that any nation ever witnessed was brought about by these mighty preachers. Some great patriarchs, prophets and kings - some wonderful men had arisen; but now the Jewish world was about to gaze upon its greatest. It was moved from center to circumference. I am amused to hear some people talk against revivals. If you take up history, you will see that every church has sprung out of revivals. This was the mightiest work the church had seen. It was sudden. It was not long before you could hear the tramp of thousands flocking from the towns into the desert to hear a man who had no commission from his fellow-men; who had gone through no seminary nor college; who had not been brought up in the temple among the sons of Levi; who belonged to no sect or party; who had no D. D., LL. D., or any handle to his name, but simply John; a Heaven-sent man, with a Heaven given name. He had no prestige in Jerusalem, nor any influential committee meetings. He was simply John the Baptist, preaching in the wilderness! And away went the crowd to hear him, and many believed him. Why? Because he was sent from GOD.

In New York, or London, or any large city, any man of note can gather a large audience; but let him go away into the desert and see if he can draw the inhabitants from the large cities to hear him, as John did. Like Elijah, he was intrepid and uncompromising. He did not preach to please the people for he denounced their sins. When the Pharisees and Sadducees came to his baptism, he cried out, O generation of vipers, who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come? And to the Jews, who prided themselves on belonging to the seed of Abraham, he said, Think not to say within 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. He tore off the mask of their hypocrisy, warned them against trusting in their self-righteousness, and told them to bring forth fruits meet for repentance. There was no pandering to their prejudices, nor truckling to their tastes or wishes. He delivered his message as he had received it from GOD; he asked no favors; he talked plainly, and called things by their right names.

We have in Matthew just a glimpse, a specimen, of his courageousness. He brought the law right down upon those who boasted of themselves. And now, said he, the ax is laid unto the root of the trees, therefore every tree that bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down and cast into the fire. And in Luke we read that the people asked him, What shall we do then? They had an inquiry-meeting right there!

That is the beginning; but he did not leave them there. You may bring down the law, and cry Reform! Reform! Repent! Repent! but that leaves a man outside the Kingdom of GOD; that does not bring him to CHRIST; and it will not be long before he goes back to his sins. In every one of his sermons John alluded to the coming Messiah.

The bank of the Jordan was his pulpit, the desert his home; when his message was delivered he retired again into the wilderness. His food was locusts and wild honey; there was not a beggar who did not fare better than he. He did not shun to declare the whole counsel of GOD. He kept back nothing.

We read: Then went out to him Jerusalem and all Judea, and all the region round about Jordan. Think of the whole population going out into the wilderness to hear this wonderful open-air preacher, to be baptized of him in Jordan, confessing their sins? John was a preacher of repentance. Perhaps no one ever rang out the word Repent like John the Baptist. Day after day, as he came out of the desert and stood on the banks of that famous river, you could hear his voice rolling out, Repent! for the kingdom of Heaven is at hand. We can almost now hear the echoes of his voice as they floated up and down the Jordan. Many wonderful scenes had been witnessed at that stream. Naaman had washed away his leprosy there; Elijah and Elisha had crossed it dryshod; Joshua had led through its channel the mighty host of the redeemed on their journey from Egypt into the promised land, but it had never seen anything like this: men, women, and children, mothers with babes in their arms, Scribes, Pharisees, and Sadducees, publicans and soldiers, flocked from Judea, Samaria, and Galilee, to hear this lonely wilderness prophet.

What excited them most was not his cry, Repent, nor that they were to be baptized, confessing their sins, in order to the remission of their sins; but it was this, He that cometh after me is mightier than I. How it must have thrilled the audience when they heard him proclaim! - There is One coming after me; I am only the herald of the coming King. You know that when kings travel in Eastern countries they are preceded by heralds who shout, The king is coming! and they clear the highways, repair the bridges, and remove the stumbling blocks. John announced that he was only His fore-runner; and that He himself was nigh at hand. Perhaps at the after-meetings some would inquire, When is He coming? He is coming unexpectedly, suddenly, and we shall see the Spirit of GOD descending and remaining upon Him. He may be here tomorrow. And as John preached His first coming, so we preach the second coming of CHRIST. It is always safe, for He said that He was coming again; and none can hinder it. We are told to watch - for death? No; for the second coming of the Lord. At length the time came when John still more mightily moved his hearers by declaring, He is among us. He is in our midst. For four thousand years had the Jews been watching for the event which it was the immediate mission of the Baptist to predict. It had been a long time to be looking into the mists of the future for the Seed of the woman that should bruise the head of the serpent; but the mists had rolled away at last.

One day there came down from Jerusalem a very influential committee, appointed by the chief priests, to ask that wilderness preacher whether he were the Messiah or Elijah, or who or what he was. In John, we read that they made their appearance when he was in the very zenith of his popularity, preaching perhaps to twenty thousand people. Pushing their way up to where he was, they said, We have been sent to inquire who you are. Are you the long-looked-for Messiah? What an opportunity he had to pass himself off as the CHRIST. All were musing as to who he was. Some said that he really was the long-looked-for One. He was one of the grandest

characters that ever trod this earth. Instead of elevating, he humbled himself. The great tendency with men is to make themselves out a little bigger than they are, to make it appear that there is more of them than there really is. Most men, as you get nearer to them, grow smaller and smaller. But John grows larger and larger! Why? Because he is nothing in his own sight. So he replied to the Committee, Take back word to those who sent you: I am Mr. Nobody. I am a voice to be heard, and not to be seen. I am here to proclaim the coming of Him whose shoe latchet I am not worthy to unloose. That is a grand character! He confessed, I am not the way; I am a finger-post pointing to the way. Walk in it. Do not follow me, but Him that is coming. I have found the way, and have come to herald the glad tidings. I wish all Christian workers would have the spirit of John, and get behind the cross, and be a mere sign-post pointing out CHRIST. John the Baptist was very little in his own estimation, but the angel had said before his birth, He shall be great in the sight of the Lord. And this was his greatness, that he cried, Behold the Lamb of GOD! I am nothing; He is all in all. Let that be our testimony.

And this is the record of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, Who art thou? And he confessed, and denied not; but confessed, I am not the CHRIST. And they asked him, What then? Art thou Elijah? And he saith, I am not. Art thou that prophet? And he answered, No. Then said they unto him, Who art thou? that we may give an answer to them that sent us. What sayest thou of thyself? He said, I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, Make straight the way of the Lord, as said the prophet Esaias, quoting Scripture; for Isaiah had prophesied that there should be a voice heard in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord.

Do you know what happened the next day? One of the most exciting things that ever took place on this earth. The next day the deputation, who waited upon this desert preacher, had perhaps returned to Jerusalem, or they may have been still on the banks of the Jordan. I think I see the crowds of men and women leaning forward with breathless eagerness to catch every word as it falls from the lips of John. He pauses suddenly in the middle of a sentence, his appearance changes, the eye that has been so keen quails, the bold rugged man shrinks back, and, as he stands silent and amazed, every eye is upon him.

Suppose at some great gathering I should stop preaching for a minute, the congregation would not know what had happened. They would ask, Has he lost the thread of his discourse? Is sickness stealing over him? Has death laid his icy hand upon him? But John stops. The people wonder what it means. The eye of the Baptist is fixed; and the crowd gives way before a Man of no very extraordinary mien, who approaches the Jordan, and addressing John, asks to be baptized. Baptize you? he remonstrates. It was the first man whom he had hesitated to baptize. The people are asking, What does this mean? John says, I have need to be baptized of Thee, and comest Thou to me? I am not worthy to baptize Thee. The Master said, Suffer it to be so now, for thus it becometh us to fulfill all righteousness; and they both went down into the Jordan, and JESUS was baptized by John. The Master commanded, and John obeyed. It was simple obedience on his part.

Canon Farrar, in his Life of CHRIST, thus describes this wonderful scene:

To this preaching, to this baptism, in the thirtieth year of His age, came JESUS from Galilee. John was His kinsman by birth, but the circumstances of their life had entirely separated them. John, as a child, in the house of the blameless priest, his father, had lived at Juttah, in the far south of the tribe of Judah, and not far from Hebron. JESUS had lived in the deep seclusion of

the carpenters shop in the valley of Galilee. When He first came to the banks of the Jordan, the great forerunner, according to his own emphatic and twice-repeated testimony, knew Him not. Though JESUS was not yet revealed as the Messiah to His great herald prophet, there was something in His look, something in the sinless beauty of His ways, something in the solemn majesty of His aspect, which at once overawed and captivated the soul of John. To others he was the uncompromising prophet; kings he could confront with rebuke; Pharisees he could unmask with indignation; but before this presence all his lofty bearing falls. As when some unknown dread checks the flight of the eagle, and makes him settle with hushed scream and drooping plumage on the ground, so before the purity of sinless life, the wild prophet of the desert becomes like a submissive and timid child. The battle-brunt which legionaries could not daunt, the lofty manhood before which hierarchs trembled and princes grew pale, resigns itself, submits, adores before moral force which is weak in every external attribute, and armed only in an invisible mail.

John bowed to the simple, stainless manhood before he had been inspired to recognize the Divine commission. He earnestly tried to forbid the purposes of JESUS. He who had received the confessions of all others now reverently and humbly makes his own: I have need to be baptized of Thee and comest Thou to me? The response contains the second recorded utterance of JESUS, and the first word of His public ministry: Suffer it to be so now, for thus it becometh us to fulfill all righteousness.

Do you tell me that the immense throng are not moved? Every man is holding his breath. And as they came out of the water, the Spirit descended like a dove and abode upon Him, and the voice of Jehovah, which had been silent on earth for centuries, was heard saying from Heaven, This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. From the time of the disobedience of the first Adam, GOD could not say that He was well pleased in man; but He could say so now. As JESUS came up out of the water, the silence of Heaven was broken: GOD Himself bore witness that He was well pleased with His beloved Son.

What a day that must have been! You have seen the moon shining in the early morning; but as the sun ascends the moon fades away. So now John fades away. The moon's light is borrowed. All it can do is to reflect the light of the sun. That is what John did. He reflected the light of the Sun of Righteousness now that He had risen with healing in His wings. From that day John changes his text. He had preached Repent; but now his text is, Behold the lamb of GOD, who taketh away the sins of the world. Behold the Sin-bearer of the world; GOD's Son come down into this world to bear away its sin. I am nothing now. He is everything.

Let us notice the testimony that John bore to CHRIST. The following was the substance of it: - He that cometh after me is mightier than I; whose shoes I am not worthy to bear; there standeth one among you whom ye know not; He it is who, coming after me, is preferred before me. He shall baptize with the HOLY GHOST and with fire. He is the Judge; His fan is in His hand; and He will thoroughly purge His floor and gather His wheat into the garner; but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire. 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 who baptizeth with the HOLY GHOST. And after all the people had been baptized in the Jordan, confessing their sins, He came from Galilee to be baptized by me. But I said, I have need to be baptized of Thee, and comest Thou to me? And He answered me, Suffer it to be so now for thus it becometh us to fulfill all righteousness. Then I suffered Him, and I baptized Him.

As He went up out of the water He was praying, and the Heaven was opened, and the HOLY GHOST descended in a bodily shape like a dove upon Him, and a voice came from Heaven, which said, Thou art my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased. And I saw and bear record that this is the Son of GOD.

The next day after JESUS had been baptized, John saw Him coming to him and said, Behold the Lamb of GOD, which taketh away the sin of the world. Yesterday He had been baptized in the same river of judgment, where all the people had been baptized, confessing their sins, and today John points Him out as the Sin-bearer. And again, the next day, John was standing with two of his disciples, and, looking upon JESUS as He walked, he said, Behold the Lamb of GOD! He did not need to add the words he used the day before. His disciples knew that the Lamb of GOD was the antitype of all the sacrifices, from Abel's offering to the lamb laid that morning on the altar of burnt-offering. The two disciples heard him speak; they did not ask him what he meant, but they followed JESUS; went home with Him, and abode with Him that day, and became two of His intimate disciples and friends.

John continued effacing, denying himself, and testifying more and more of JESUS. I am not the CHRIST: I am sent before Him. He is the Bridegroom, and I the Bridegrooms friend: I rejoice greatly, because of the Bridegrooms voice. This my joy, therefore, is fulfilled. He must increase, but I must decrease. He cometh from above; He is above all. And what He hath heard in Heaven that He testifieth. But no one receives His testimony. He that hath received His testimony hath set to his seal that GOD is true. For GOD hath sent Him, and He speaketh the words of GOD, for GOD giveth not the Spirit by measure unto Him. The Father loved the Son, and hath given all things into His hand. He that believeth in the Son hath everlasting life: and he that believeth not the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of GOD is abiding on him.

Yes: He that cometh from Heaven is above all. No prophet, priest, nor king, ever lived to compare with Him. JESUS CHRIST had no peer. We ought to bear this in mind, and never put Him on a level with any other man. When Moses and Elijah appeared on the Mount of Transfiguration, Peter said to JESUS, Let us make here three tabernacles, one for Thee, and one for Moses, and one for Elias (Elijah). But while he yet spoke a bright cloud overshadowed them. And when they had lifted up their eyes, they saw no man save JESUS only. JESUS was left alone to show the superiority of the new dispensation, which was represented by Him, over the old dispensation, represented by Moses and Elijah. GOD's voice said, This is my beloved son... hear ye Him. CHRIST has no equal. He is above all; He is sent by GOD; yea, He is GOD; all things were made by Him; he speaks the words of GOD; and the Spirit is given to Him without measure.

It was not long, however, before jealousy began to rankle in the breasts of Johns disciples. One of the worst things with which Christian people have to contend is jealousy. It is a most accursed viper, and I would to GOD that it were cast out of all our hearts. This is one of the devils that needs to be cast out. It were, indeed, well if we all possessed the feeling which animated Moses when Joshua asked him to forbid Eldad and Medad from prophesying in the camp: And Moses said unto him, Enviest thou for my sake? would GOD that all the Lord's people were prophets, and that the Lord would put his Spirit upon them. If ever there were two men who had reason to be jealous, they were Jonathan and John the Baptist; but the one stripped himself of the robe that was upon him, and gave it to David; and the other, when his disciples sought to arouse Johns jealousy of Him of whom he came to bear witness, on account of the great crowds who flocked

to His ministry, answered and said, A man can receive nothing except it be given him from Heaven. Ye yourselves bear me witness, that I said, I am not the CHRIST, but that I am sent before Him.

I do not know of anything, in all Scripture, more sublime than that one thing. As if John had said, My joy is fulfilled. I could not be happier. I am the friend of the Bridegroom. I came to introduce Him. I want all my disciples to follow Him. I must decrease, He must increase. I once heard Dr. Bonar remark that he could tell whether a Christian were growing. In proportion to his growth in grace he would elevate his Master, talk less of what he was doing, and become smaller and smaller in his own esteem, until, like the morning star, he faded away before the rising sun. Jonathan was willing to decrease, that David might increase; and John the Baptist showed the same spirit of humility.

It took a great deal of grace for a man who, like John, had had such vast crowds following him out of the cities into the wilderness, to listen to his preaching, to declare that his mission was accomplished, and that he must retire into obscurity. He gloried in it. As a friend of the Bridegroom, he rejoiced to hear His voice, and that the stone that smote the image would become a great mountain, and fill the whole earth.

I think that John showed more unselfishness than any man that ever lived. He did not know what selfishness was. If we could analyze our feelings, we should find that self is mixed up with almost everything we do; and that this is the reason why we have so little power as Christians. Oh, that this awful viper may be cast out! If we preached down ourselves and exalted CHRIST, the world would soon be reached. The world is perishing today for the want of CHRIST. The church could do without our theories and pet views, but not without CHRIST; and when her ministers get behind the cross, so that CHRIST is held up, the people will come flocking to hear the Gospel. Selfishness is one of the greatest hindrances to the cause of CHRIST. Everyone wants the chief seat in the synagogue. One prides himself that he is pastor of this church, and another of that. Would to GOD we could get all this out of the way and say, He must increase, but I must decrease. We cannot do it, however, except we get down at the foot of the cross. Human nature likes to be lifted up; the grace of GOD alone can humble us.

I have no sympathy with those who think that John lost confidence in his Master. From the earliest times a great difference of opinion has existed among ecclesiastical writers as to the question which John from the prison sent his two disciples to ask of JESUS. The difficulty has been stated thus: - If John the Baptist had recognized in our Lord the Eternal Son of GOD, the Divine Lamb, and the Heavenly Bridegroom, is it possible to believe that he could, within a few months, question whether JESUS was the CHRIST; and that he should, with a simple desire for information, have asked, Art Thou He that should come, or do we look for another?

Some have thought that it was so, and have accounted for Johns declension from his former testimony to JESUS, by supposing that the prophetic gift of the HOLY SPIRIT had departed from him. Others have indignantly refused to believe this, and have eagerly defended John by maintaining that he simply sought by sending them to JESUS to remove the doubts of the disciples themselves. I have strongly urged this view myself in preference to the other, for I cannot believe that this noble man, who was filled with the HOLY GHOST from his mothers womb, and who had been his appointed forerunner, became discouraged by a few months in prison, and gave up his confidence in JESUS as the promised Messiah.

I think, however, that Dr. Reynolds, in his Lectures on John the Baptist, has thrown much light on this subject, and has shown that John may quite consistently have sent to ask this question; he says:

Until the death, resurrection, and ascension of JESUS had taken place, until the descent of the Spirit, Johns prophecies were not completely fulfilled. He may, nay, he must, have had ideas of the Coming One which JESUS had not yet realized. There is nothing, therefore, unworthy of Johns character, nothing incompatible with Johns testimonies, in the supposition that he did not see the whole of his ideal embodied in the ministry of JESUS... There were elements of the Coming One which were clearly a part of that type of Messiah which entered into Johns predictions, and he was specially tempted or moved to ask, Art Thou the coming One, or must we expect another of a different kind from Thyself, to fulfill the larger hope that is throbbing in the heart of Israel?

After these disciples had left, it was that CHRIST gave His testimony to John. It was, Verily I say unto you, Among them that are born of women, there hath not risen a greater than John the Baptist. What a tribute for the Son of GOD to pay! That must have sounded strange in the ears of the Jews. What! Greater than Abraham the father of the faithful? than Moses, the law-giver? than Elijah and Elisha? than Isaiah, Daniel, and all the prophets? Yes, none in all the world, born of women, greater than John. That is the eulogy which was pronounced on him. Truly he that humbleth himself shall be exalted. John had humbled himself before the Master, and now the Master exalts His faithful servant.

But this testimony of JESUS to His forerunner must not be regarded exclusively or chiefly as relating to his personal character. There hath not risen a greater [prophet] than John the Baptist; notwithstanding he that is least in the kingdom of Heaven is greater than he. No prophet under the old dispensation had so great a testimony to bear as John. None before him could say, There stands among you He that baptizes with the HOLY GHOST. Behold the Lamb of GOD! But the least disciple in the new dispensation has a still greater testimony. He can declare accomplished salvation: for the essence of the Gospel is JESUS and the resurrection.

John was beheaded for his testimony, the first martyr for the Gospels sake. He sealed his testimony with his blood. He rebuked the king, and told him that it was not lawful for him to live in adultery. He was not ashamed to deliver GOD's message just as it had been given to him. And no man has lived from the time of John but has enemies, if he be a disciple of CHRIST. CHRIST said this, For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, He hath a devil. The Son of man came eating and drinking, and they say, Behold a man gluttonous and a wine bibber, a friend of publicans and sinners. Think of saying that John the Baptist had a devil! Such a man! That is the worlds estimate. They hated him. Why? Because he rebuked sin.

He, the last of a long line of prophets, was beheaded for his testimony, and buried in the land of Moab, just outside the promised land, near to where Moses, the first law-giver, was buried. His ministry was very short. It lasted only two years. But he had finished his course; he had done his work.

Dear friend, you and I may not have that time to work. Let us consecrate ourselves and get the world and self beneath our feet; and let CHRIST be all and in all. We must stoop to conquer. Let

us be nothing, and CHRIST everything. Let the house of Saul wax weaker and weaker, and the house of David wax stronger and stronger. Let us get to the end of self, and adopt as our motto, He must increase, but I must decrease.

~ end of chapter 11 ~
