**THE EXPOSITION OF HOLY SCRIPTURE BY ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

**LUKE-001**. **ELIJAH COME AGAIN by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"5. There was, in the days of Herod the king of Judea, a certain priest named Zacharias, of the course of Abijah: and his wife was of the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elisabeth. 6. And they were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless. 7. And they had no child, because that Elisabeth was barren; and they both were now well stricken in years. 8. And it came to pass, that, while he executed the priest's office before God in the order of his course, 9. According to the custom of the priest's office, his lot was to burn incense when he went into the temple of the Lord. 10. And the whole multitude of the people were praying without at the time of incense. 11. And there appeared unto him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense. 12. And when Zacharias saw him, he was troubled, and fear fell upon him. 13. But the angel said unto him, Fear not, Zacharias: for thy prayer is heard; and thy wife Elisabeth shall bear thee a son, and thou shalt call his name John. 14. And thou shalt have joy and gladness; and many shall rejoice at his birth. 15. For he shall be great in the sight of the Lord, and shall drink neither wine nor strong drink; and he shall be filled with the Holy Ghost, even from his mother's womb. 16. And many of the children of Israel shall he turn to the Lord their God. 17. And he shall go before Him in the spirit and power of Elias, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just; to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."*

*Luke 1:5-17*

The difference between the style of Luke's preface (vs. 1-4) and the subsequent chapters relating to the Nativity suggests that these are drawn from some Hebrew source. They are saturated with Old Testament phraseology and constructions, and are evidently translated by Luke. It is impossible to say whence they came, but no one is more likely to have been their original narrator than Mary herself. Elisabeth or Zacharias must have communicated the facts in this chapter, for there is no indication that those contained in this passage, at all events, were known to any but these two.

If we were considering a fictitious story, we should note the artistic skill which prepared for the appearance of the hero by the introduction first of his satellite; but the order of the narrative is due, not to artistic skill, but to the divinely ordered sequence of events. It was fitting that John's office as Forerunner should begin even before his birth. So the story of his entrance into the world prepares for that of the birth which hallows all births.

**I. We have first a beautiful outline picture of the quiet home in the hill country.**

The husband and wife were both of priestly descent, and in their modest lives, away among the hills, were lovely types of Old Testament godliness. That they are pronounced blamelessmilitates against no doctrine of universal sinfulness. It is not to be taken as dogma at all, but as the expression of God's merciful estimate of His servantscharacters. These two simple saints lived, as all married believers should do, yoked together in the sweet exercise of godliness, and helping each other to all high and noble things. Hideous corruption of wedlock reigned round them. Such profanations of it as were shown later by Herod and Herodias, Agrippa and Bernice, were but too common; but in that quiet nook these two dwelt as heirs together of the grace of life, and their prayers were not hindered.

The most of the priests who appear in the Gospels are heartless formalists, if not worse; yet not only Annas and Caiaphas and their spiritual kindred ministered at the altar, but there were some in whose hearts the ancient fire burned. In times of religious declension, the few who still are true are mostly in obscure corners, and live quiet lives, like springs of fresh water rising in the midst of a salt ocean. John thus sprang from parents in whom the old system had done all that it could do. In his origin, as in himself, he represented the consummate flower of Judaism, and discharged its highest office in pointing to the coming One.

This blamelesspair had a crook in their lot. Childlessness was then an especial sorrow, and many a prayer had gone up from both that their solitary home might be gladdened by children's patter and prattle. But their disappointed hope had not made them sour, nor turned their hearts from God. If they prayed about it, they would not murmur at it, and they were not thereby hindered from walking in all God's commandments and ordinances blameless. Let us learn that unfulfilled wishes are not to clog our devotion, nor to silence our prayers, nor to slacken our running the race set before us.

**II. We are carried away from the home among the hills to the crowded Temple courts.**

The devout priest has come up to the city, leaving his aged wife in solitude, for his turn of service has arrived. Details of the arrangements of the sacerdotal coursesneed not detain us. We need only note that the office of burning incense was regarded as an honour, was determined by lot, and took place at the morning and evening sacrifice. So Zacharias, with his censer in his hand, went to the altar which stood in front of the veil, flanked on the right hand by the table of shewbread, and on the left by the great lamp-stand. The place, his occupation, the murmur of many praying voices without, would all tend to raise his thoughts to God; and the curling incense, as it ascended, would truly symbolise the going up of his heart in aspiration, desire, and trust. Such a man could not do his work heartlessly or formally.

Mark the manner of the angel's appearance. He was not seen as in the act of coming, but was suddenly made visible standing by the altar, as if he had been stationed there before; and what had happened was not that he came, but that Zacharias's eyes were opened. So, when Elisha's servant was terrified at the sight of the besiegers, the prophet prayed that his eyes might be opened, and when they were, he saw what had been there before, the mountain full of horses and chariots of fire. Not the Temple courts only, but all places are full of divine messengers, and we should see them if our vision was purged. But such considerations are not to weaken the supernatural element in the appearance of this angel with his message. He was sent, whatever that may mean in regard to beings whose relation to place must be different from ours. He had an utterance of God's will to impart.

It has often been objected to these chapters that they are full of angelic appearances, which modern thought deems suspicious. But surely if the birth of Jesus was what we hold it to have been, the coming into human life of the Incarnate Son of God, it is not legend that angel wings gleam in their whiteness all through the story, and angel voices adore the Lord of men as well as angels, and angel eyes gaze on His cradle, and learn new lessons there.

**III. We have next the angel's message.**

The devoutest heart is conscious of shrinking dread when brought face to face with celestial brightness that has overflowed into our darkness. So Fear notis the first word on the messenger's lips, and one can fancy the accent of sweetness and the calm of heart which followed. It has often been thought that Zacharias had been praying for offspring while he was burning incense; but the narrative does not say so, and besides the fact that he had ceased to hope for children (as is shown by his incredulity), surely it casts a slur on his religious character to suppose that personal wishes were uppermost at so sacred a moment. Prayers that he had long ago put aside as finally refused, now started to life again. God delays often, but He does not forget. Blessings may come to-day as the result of old prayers which have almost passed from our memory and our hope.

Observe how brief is the announcement of the child's birth, important as that was to the father's heart, and how the prophecy lingers on the child's future work, which is important for the world. His name, character, and work in general are first spoken, and then his specific office as the Forerunner is delineated at the close. The name is significant. Johnmeans The Lord is gracious. It was an omen, a condensed prophecy, the fulfilment of which stretched beyond its bearer to Him as whose precursor alone was John a token of God's grace.

His character (ver. 15) puts first great in the sight of the Lord. Then there are some whom God recognises as great, small as we all are before Him. And His estimate of greatness is not the world's estimate. How Herod or Pilate or Caesar, or philosophers at Athens, or rabbis in Jerusalem would have scoffed if they had been pointed to the gaunt ascetic pouring out words which they would have thought wild, to a crowd of Jews, and been told that that was the greatest man in the world (except One)! The elements of greatness in the estimate of God which is truth, are devotion to His service, burning convictions, intense moral earnestness, superiority to sensuous delights, clear recognition of Jesus, and humble self-abnegation before Him. These are not the elements recognised in the world's Pantheon. Let us take God's standard.

John was to be a Nazarite, living not for the senses, but the soul, as all God's great ones have to be. The form may vary, but the substance of the vow of abstinence remains for all Christians. To put the heel on the animal within, and keep it well chained up, is indispensable, if we are ever to know the buoyant inspiration which comes from a sacreder source than the fumes of the wine-cup. Like John, we must flee the one if we would have the other, and be filled with the Holy Ghost.

The consequence of his character is seen in his work, as described generally in verse 16. Only such a man can effect such a change, in a time of religious decay, as to turn many to God. It needs a strong arm to check the downward movement and to reverse it. No one who is himself entangled in sense, and but partially filled with God's Spirit, will wield great influence for good. It takes a Hercules to stop the chariot racing down hill, and God's Herculeses are all made on one pattern, in so far that they scorn delights, and empty themselves of self and sense that they may be filled with the Spirit.

John's specific office is described in verse 17, with allusion to the closing prophecy of Malachi. That prophecy had kindled an expectation that Elijah, in person, would precede Messias. John was like a reincarnation of the stern prophet. He came in a similar epoch. His characteristic, like Elijah's, was power, not gentleness. If the earlier prophet had to beard Ahab and Jezebel, the second Elijah had Herod and Herodias. Both haunted the desert, both pealed out thunders of rebuke. Both shook the nation, and stirred conscience. No two figures in Scripture are truer brethren in spirit than Elijah the Tishbite and John the Baptist.

His great work is to go before the Messiah, and to prepare Israel for its King. Observe that the name of the coming One is not mentioned in verse 17. Himis enough. Zacharias knew who Hewas. But observe, too, that the same mysterious person is distinctly called The Lord, which in this connection, and having regard to the original prophecy in Malachi, can only be the divine name. So, in some fashion not yet made plain, Messiah's advent was to be the Lord's coming to His people, and John was the Forerunner, in some sense, of Jehovah Himself.

But the way in which Israel was to be prepared is further specified in the middle clauses of the verse, which are also based on Malachi's words. The interpretation of to turn the hearts of the fathers to the childrenis very doubtful; but the best explanation seems to be that the phrase means to bring back to the descendants of the ancient fathers of the nation the ancestral faith and obedience. They are to be truly Abraham's seed, because they do the works and cherish the faith of Abraham. The words imply the same truth which John afterwards launched as a keen-edged dart, Think not to say, We have Abraham to our father. Descent after the flesh should lead to kindred in spirit. If it does not, it is nought.

To turn the disobedient to the wisdom of the justis practically the same change, only regarded from another point of view. John was sent to effect repentance, that change of mind and heart by which the disobedient to the commands of God should be brought to possess and exercise the moral and religious discernment which dwells only in the spirits of the righteous. Disobedience is folly. True wisdom cannot be divorced from rectitude. Real rectitude cannot live apart from obedience to God.

Such was God's intention in sending John. How sadly the real effects of his mission contrast with its design! So completely can men thwart God, as Jesus said in reference to John's mission, The Pharisees and lawyers frustrated the counsel of God against themselves, being not baptized of him. Let us take heed lest we bring to nothing, so far as we are concerned, His gracious purpose of redemption in Christ!