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

**LUKE-010**. **JOHN THE PREACHER OF REPENTANCE by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"1. Now, in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Cesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, and Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and of the region of Trachonitis, and Lysanias the tetrarch of Abilene, 2. Annas and Caiaphas being the high priests, the word of God came unto John, the son of Zacharias, in the wilderness. 3. And he came into all the country about Jordan, preaching the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins; 4. As it is written in the book of the words of Esaias the prophet, saying, The voice of one crying in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make His paths straight. 6. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be brought low; and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways shall be made smooth; 6. And all flesh shall see the salvation of God. 7. Then said he to the multitude that came forth to be baptized of him, O generation of vipers, who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come! 8. Bring forth therefore fruits worthy of repentance; and begin 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. 9. And now also the axe is laid unto the root of the trees: every tree therefore which bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire. 10. And the people asked him, saying, What shall we do then? 11. He answereth and saith unto them, He that hath two coats, let him impart to him that hath none; and he that hath meat, let him do likewise. 12. Then came also publicans to be baptized, and said unto him, Master, what shall we do? 13. And he said unto them, Exact no more than that which is appointed you. 14. And the soldiers likewise demanded of him, saying, And what shall we do? And he said unto them, Do violence to no man, neither accuse any falsely; and be content with your wages."*

*Luke 3:1-14*

Why does Luke enumerate so carefully the civil and ecclesiastical authorities in verses 1 and 2? Not only to fix the date, but, in accordance with the world-wide aspect of his Gospel, to set his narrative in relation with secular history; and, further, to focus into one vivid beam of light the various facts which witnessed to the sunken civil and darkened moral and religious condition of the Jews. What more needed to be said to prove how the ancient glory had faded, than that they were under the rule of such a delegate as Pilate, of such an emperor as Tiberius, and that the bad brood of Herod's descendants divided the sacred land between them, and that the very high-priesthood was illegally administered, so that such a pair as Annas and Caiaphas held it in some irregular fashion between them? It was clearly high time for John to come, and for the word of God to come to him.

The wilderness had nourished the stern, solitary spirit of the Baptist, and there the consciousness of his mission and his message came to him--a phrase which at once declares his affinity with the old prophets. Out of the desert he burst on the nation, sudden as lightning, and cleaving like it. Luke says nothing as to his garb or food, but goes straight to the heart of his message, The baptism of repentance unto remission of sins, in which expression the remissiondepends neither on baptismalone, nor on repentancealone. The outward act was vain if unaccompanied by the state of mind and will; the state of mind was proved genuine by submitting to the act.

In verses 7 to 14 John's teaching as the preacher of repentance is summarised. Why did he meet the crowds that streamed out to him with such vehement rebuke? One would have expected him to welcome them, instead of calling them offspring of vipers, and seeming to be unwilling that they should flee from the wrath to come. But Luke tells why. They wished to be baptized, but there is no word of their repentance. Rather, they were trusting to their descent as exempting them from the approaching storm, so that their baptism would not have been the baptism which John required, being devoid of repentance. Just because they thought themselves safe as being children of Abraham, they deserved John's rough name, ye offspring of vipers.

Rabbinical theology has much to say about the merits of the fathers. John, like every prophet who had ever spoken to the nation of judgments impending, felt that the sharp edge of his words was turned by the obstinate belief that judgments were for the Gentile, and never would touch the Jew. Do we not see the same unbelief that God can ever visit England with national destruction in full force among ourselves? Not the virtues of past generations, but the righteousness of the present one, is the guarantee of national exaltation.

John's crowds were eager to be baptized as an additional security, but were slow to repent. If heaven could be secured by submitting to a rite, multitudeswould come for it, but the crowd thins quickly when the administrator of the rite becomes the vehement preacher of repentance. That is so to-day as truly as it was so by the fords of Jordan. John demanded not only repentance, but its fruits, for there is no virtue in a repentance which does not change the life, were such possible.

Repentance is more than sorrow for sin. Many a man has that, and yet rushes again into the old mire. To change the mind and will is not enough, unless the change is certified to be real by deeds corresponding. So John preached the true nature of repentance when he called for its fruits. And he preached the greatest motive for it which he knew, when he pressed home on sluggish consciences the close approach of a judgment for which everything was ready, the axe ground to a fine edge, and lying at the root of the trees. If it lay there, there was no time to lose; if it still lay, there was time to repent before it was swinging round the woodman's head. We have a higher motive for repentance in the goodness of Godleading to it. But there is danger that modern Christianity should think too little of the terror of the Lord, and so should throw away one of the strongest means of persuading men. John's advice to the various classes of hearers illustrates the truth that the commonest field of duty and the homeliest acts may become sacred. Not high-flying, singular modes of life, abandoning the vulgar tasks, but the plainest prose of jog-trot duty will follow and attest real repentance. Every calling has its temptations--that is to say, every one has its opportunities of serving God by resisting the Devil.