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

**LUKE-011**. **JOHN'S WITNESS TO JESUS, AND GOD'S by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"15. And as the people were in expectation, and all men mused in their hearts of John, whether he were the Christ, or not; 16. John answered, saying unto them all, I indeed baptize you with water; but one mightier than I cometh, the latchet of whose shoes I am not worthy to unloose: He shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost, and with fire: 17. Whose fan is in His hand, and He will thoroughly purge His floor, and will gather the wheat into His garner; but the chaff He will burn with fire unquenchable. 18. And many other things, in his exhortation, preached he unto the people. 19. But Herod the tetrarch, being reproved by him for Herodias his brother Philip's wife, and for all the evils which Herod had done, 20. Added yet this above all, that he shut up John in prison. 21. Now, when all the people were baptized, it came to pass, that Jesus also being baptized, and praying, the heaven was opened, 22. 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 Thee I am well pleased."*

*Luke 3:15-22*

This passage falls into three parts: John's witness to the coming Messiah (vs. 15-17); John's undaunted rebuke of sin in high places, and its penalty (vs. 18-20); and God's witness to Jesus (vs. 21, 22).

**I.** Luke sharply parts off the Baptist's work as a preacher of repentance and plain morality from his work as the herald who preceded the king. The former is delineated in verses 7-14, and its effect was to set light to the always smouldering expectation of the Messiah. The people were ready to rally round him if he would say that he was the coming deliverer. It was a real temptation, but his unmoved humility, which lay side by side with his boldness, brushed it aside, and poured an effectual stream of cold water on the excitement. John answeredthe popular questionings, of which he was fully aware, and his answer crushed them.

In less acute fashion, the same temptation comes to all who move the general conscience. Disciples always seek to hoist their teacher higher than is fitting. Adherence to him takes the place of obedience to his message, and, if he is a true man, he has to damp down misdirected enthusiasm.

Mark John's clear apprehension of the limitations of his work. He baptized with water, the symbol and means of outward cleansing. He does not depreciate his position or the importance of his baptism, but his whole soul bows in reverence before the coming Messiah, whose great office was to transcend his, as the wide Mediterranean surpassed the little lake of Galilee. His outline of that work is grand, though incomplete. It is largely based upon Malachi's closing prophecy, and the connection witnesses to John's consciousness that he was the Elijah foretold there. He saw that the Messiah would surpass him in his special endowment. Strong as he was, that other was to be stronger. Probably he did not dream that that other was to wield the divine might, nor that His perfect strength was to be manifested in weakness, and to work its wonders by the might of gentle, self-sacrificing love. But, though he dimly saw, he perfectly adored. He felt himself unworthy (literally, insufficient) to be the slave who untied (or, according to Matthew, bore) his lord's sandals. How beautiful is the lowliness of that strong nature! He stood erect in the face of priests and tetrarchs, and furious women, and the headsman with his sword, but he lay prostrate before his King.

Strength and royal authority were not all that he had to proclaim of Messiah. He shall baptize you in the Holy Ghost and fire. We observe that the construction here is different from that in verse 16 (with water), inasmuch as the preposition inis inserted, which, though it is often used instrumentaly, is here, therefore, more probably to be taken as meaning simply in. The two nouns are coupled under one preposition, which suggests that they are fused together in the speaker's mind as reality and symbol.

Fire is a frequently recurrent emblem of the Holy Spirit, both in the Old and New Testament. It is not the destructive, but the vitalising, glowing, transforming, energy of fire, which is expressed. The fervour of holy enthusiasm, the warmth of ardent love, the melting of hard hearts, the change of cold, damp material into its own ruddy likeness, are all set forth in this great symbol. John's water baptism was poor beside Messiah's immersion into that cleansing fire. Fire turns what it touches into kindred flame. The refiner's fire melts metal, and the scum carries away impurities. Water washes the surface, fire pierces to the centre.

But while that cleansing by the Spirit's fire was to be Messiah's primary office, man's freedom to accept or reject such blessing necessarily made His work selective, even while its destination was universal. So John saw that His coming would part men into two classes, according as they submitted to His baptism of fire or not. The homely image of the threshing-floor, on some exposed, windy height, carries a solemn truth. The Lord of the harvest has an instrument in His hand, which sets up a current of air, and the wheat falls in one heap, while the husks are blown farther, and lie at the edge of the floor. Mark the majestic emphasis on the Christ's ownership in the two phrases, His floorand His garner.

Notice, too, the fact which determines whether a man is chaff or wheat--namely, his yielding to or rejecting the fiery baptism which Christ offers. Ponder that awful emblem of an empty, rootless, fruitless, worthless life, which John caught up from Psalm I. Thankfully think of the care and safe keeping and calm repose shadowed in that picture of the wheat stored in the garner after the separating act. And let us lay on awed hearts the terrible doom of the chaff. There are two fires, to one or other of which we must be delivered. Either we shall gladly accept the purging fire of the Spirit which burns sin out of us, or we shall have to meet the punitive fire which burns up us and our sins together. To be cleansed by the one or to be consumed by the other is the choice before each of us.

**II.** Verses 18-20 show John as the preacher and martyr of righteousness. Luke tells his fate out of its proper place, in order to finish with him, and, as it were, clear the stage for Jesus. Similarly the Baptist's desert life is told by anticipation in chapter 1:80. That treatment of his story marks his subordination. His martyrdom is not narrated by Luke, though he knew of it (Luke 9:7-9), and this brief summary is all that is said of his heroic vehemence of rebuke to sin in high places, and of his suffering for righteousnesssake. John's message had two sides to it, as every gospel of God's has. To the people he spoke good tidings and exhortations; to lordly sinners he pealed out stern rebukes.

It needs some courage to tell a prince to his face that he is foul with corruption, and, still more, to put a finger on his actual sins. But he is no prophet who does not lift up his voice like a trumpet, and speak to hardened consciences. King Demos is quite as impatient of close dealing with his immorality as Herod was. London and New York get as angry with the Christian men who fight against their lust and drunkenness as ever he did, and would not be sorry if they could silence these persistent fanaticsas conveniently as he could. The need for courage like John's, and plain speech like his, is not past yet. The good tidingshas rebuke as part of its substance. The sword is two-edged.

**III.** The narrative now turns to Jesus, and does not even name John as having baptized Him. The peculiarities of Luke's account of the baptism are instructive. He omits the conversation between Jesus and John, and the fact of John's seeing the dove and hearing the voice. Like Mark, he makes the divine voice speak directly to Jesus, whereas Matthew represents it as spoken concerning Him. The baptism itself is disposed of in an incidental clause (having been baptized). The general result of these characteristics is that this account lays emphasis on the bearing of the divine witness as borne to Jesus Himself. It does not deny, but simply ignores, its aspect as a witness borne to John.

Another striking point is Luke's mention of Christ's prayer, which is thus represented as answered by the opened heavens, the descending dove, and the attesting voice. We owe most of our knowledge of Christ's prayers to this Evangelist, whose mission was to tell of the Son of man. Mysteries beyond our plummets are contained in this story; but however unique it is, it has this which may be reproduced, that prayer unveiled heaven, and brought down the dove to abide on the bowed head, and the divine attestation of sonship to fill the waiting heart.

We need not dwell on the beautiful significance of the emblem of the dove. It symbolised both the nature of that gracious, gentle Spirit, and the perpetuity and completeness of its abode on Jesus. Others receive portions of that celestial fullness, but itself, as if embodied in visible form, settled down on Him, and, with meekly folded wings, tarried there unscared. God giveth not the Spirit by measure unto Him.

Our Evangelist does not venture into the deep waters, nor attempt to tell what was the relation between the Incarnate Word, as it dwelt in Jesus before that descent, and the Spirit which came upon Him. We shall be wise if we refrain from speculating on such points, and content ourselves with knowing that there has been one manhood capable of receiving and retaining uninterruptedly the whole Spirit of God; and that He will fill us with the Spirit which dwelt in Him, in measure and manner corresponding to our need and our faith.

The heavenly voice spoke to the heart of the man Jesus. What was His need of it, and what were its effects on Him, we do not presume to affirm. But probably it originated an increased certitude of the consciousness which dawned, in His answer to Mary, of His unique divine sonship. To us it declares that He stands in an altogether unexampled relation of kindred to the Father, and that His whole nature and acts are the objects of God's complacency. But He has nothing for Himself alone, and in Him we may become God's beloved sons, well pleasing to the Father.