

Is There Joy of Service Among Us?

Beloved brethren and sisters in Jesus, it is more than mere coincidence that Luke begins his third chapter with an outline of the names of the current great ones who ruled over men, from Tiberius Caesar on the Roman throne to Caiaphas the Jewish High Priest—and then adds:

"The Word of God came unto John the son of Zacharias, IN THE WILDERNESS."

Rome—with all its power, pomp, and so-called culture: ever boasting of the wisdom of its senators and the justice of its legislators. YET—the Word of God came unto John—IN THE WILDERNESS. We ask you if you do not see a remarkable parallel in the circumstances of the birth, mission and message of John the Baptist, and OUR work, message and expectation today?

God works through what appear to the world to be the weakest links. He works to the abasement of pride and to the humbling of all flesh. John the Baptist, like Jesus, was a "root out of a dry ground," and the Word of the Lord was precious in those days, as in the days of Samuel. Yet an old priest, fervently trying to keep the lamp of God alight in the midst of the darkness of a backsliding and rebellious nation, was the subject of angelic visitation.

"WE THAT ARE ALIVE AND REMAIN"

Of Zacharias and Elizabeth, Luke's testimony is that they were both "righteous before God and walked in the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless." Surely there is a remarkable parallel here. Today the light of Truth is almost obscured by the glare of national and international events, and the voice of Truth greatly weakened because of the tension and stress of the times. Yet the apostle Paul writes of —

"We that are ALIVE AND REMAIN unto the coming of the Lord" (1 Thess. 4:17)

—indicating that there WILL be some waiting for the consolation of Israel and looking for the kingdom right up to the end. It may be asked, "To whom will Christ reveal himself?" Not unto kings, rulers, educators, or the great men of Church or State, but rather to those few brethren and sisters scattered abroad who first apply the Word of Truth to their OWN lives, and then labour together to uphold the love, mercy and purpose of God before their fellowmen. An ecclesia here, a brother or sister in isolation there, all engaged like Zacharias in keeping the light of Truth burning—they will hear the welcome voice:

"Behold the Bridegroom cometh! Go ye forth to meet him!"

Brethren and Sisters, there is one thing that is necessary: that we endeavour to so order our lives that we may, in so far as possible, be "righteous before God and walk in the commandments of the Lord blameless."

MAKING READY A PEOPLE

Following the narrative, we still see a remarkable comparison. John's mission was to "prepare the way of the Lord." One is inclined to think of the words on the cover of the Berean to the effect that its various activities are undertaken "to help make ready a People prepared for the coming of the Lord." All our efforts in the Truth and all ecclesial activities should have this end in view, and the ecclesia cannot engage in any activity which has no apostolic precedent without seriously impairing this great work. If we are to continue to be as a "city set on a hill" we must continue to let our voice be heard in the wilderness of the people. Give the Truth the widest possible utterance, and say to our generation, "Prepare ye the way of the Lord."

The manner of John's life, his moderation, his asceticism, his modest apparel, and above all his message, was responsible for the rise and fall of many in Israel, for the axe was laid to the root of the tree. His courage, his faith, his hope and determination are reflected in the Master's statement that among all the prophets there has arisen none greater than John the Baptist. John's life and message made a great impression on many, and they flocked to his baptism from all walks of life, but as to whether the impression was lasting depended on the fruits of repentance. What a wonderful opportunity is afforded us to reciprocate the love of God toward us by engaging in the many branches of the Truth's activities, knowing that all labour in this direction carries with it a redeeming future —

"For blessed are those servants whom the Lord when he cometh shall find so doing" (Luke 12:37).

There is something more than baptism necessary to prepare the way of the Lord, as the people were informed by John:

"He that hath two coats, let him impart to him that hath none; and he that hath meat, let him do likewise." (John 3:11).

This is a divine injunction, greatly elaborated on by our Master and the apostles. Paul exhorts us to "spend and be spent" in the service of the Truth. The lesson of the rich young ruler teaches us that we should be prepared to offer all that we have on the altar. We might at first reason that these sayings of John, and afterwards spoken by Jesus, are unreasonable. There is for instance the statement in Luke 14:27-33, —

"And whosoever doth not bear his cross, and come after me, cannot be my disciple. . . . So likewise, whosoever he be of you that forsaketh not all that he hath, he cannot be my disciple."

Upon reflection however, these are but exhortations to us to attain unto the spirit-filled life. Jesus said his yoke was easy and his burden light. We could ask, "Is there enough joy of service in the brotherhood?" Is there a possibility we are thinking a little too much of ourselves, of our attainments, of our immediate future, comfort and welfare, and the wherewithal shall we be clothed, and neglecting the Kingdom of God and its righteousness? Have we tried losing ourselves in the service of the Christ and the Truth? Have we tried visiting the sick and widows in their affliction? Have we tried to comfort, cheer and uphold those who sit alone because of the Word? Have we tried to bear one another's burdens? If so, then will our light rise in obscurity and our darkness be as the noonday (Isa. 58:10).

Brethren and sisters, to understand our capabilities and the work we, are suited for in the Truth, and to pursue it with all our heart, that is what the Master meant. The apostle Paul wrote of those whose good works go before to judgment and of those whose works follow after. There are those such as exhorting, lecturing and presiding brethren, whose works in these capacities are open and apparent, but moving amongst the brotherhood will convince us that much work is being done secretly and in quietness, and like as in the days of Solomon the house of God is being built, and the sound of the workman's hammer is not heard.

Some are very capable at writing letters. "To do good and communicate," writes the apostle, "forget not, for with such sacrifices God is well-pleased." There are others skilful and able to speak a word in season to him that is weary, and thereby have comforted and upheld many. We can ask ourselves the question: Have we found our level in the Truth? If so, we shall find joy, happiness and contentment in it. For "if there be first a willing heart, it is accepted in that a man hath."

"SEND WHOM THOU WILT SEND"

God had demonstrated his great power before Moses and assured him of divine presence, and had commanded him to go forth with full assurance, and had equipped him for the great work ahead. But Moses lacked confidence. He began to weigh the power of God with what he thought was his own natural ability.

"O my Lord, I am not eloquent, neither heretofore, nor since thou hast spoken unto thy servant; but I am slow of speech, and of a slow tongue." (Ex. 4:10).

After being again assured of the divine power and presence, he was moved to exclaim —

"O my Lord, send I pray thee, by the hand of him whom thou wilt send. And the anger of the Lord was kindled against Moses," (Ex. 4:13).

And because of Moses' reaction to the divine call, he was forced to rely to some extent upon a man weaker than himself. Again, we ask: Have we found our level in the Truth? It may be upon those members who seem to be less comely, God will bestow the more abundant honour. If, again, as the result of ecclesial arrangement, guidance and direction, the united efforts of brethren and sisters are brought out, surely it is like the extraordinary spectacle of powerful searchlights all focused on one spot in the darkness of the night. To lose ourselves in the work of the Truth, this is what our Master meant. Surely, if we do this, we will be forsaking all that we have, for what time, inclination or desire would we have for the world? In Matt. 13:44, we read:

"The kingdom of heaven is like unto treasure hid in a field: the which when a man hath found, he hideth, and for joy thereof goeth and selleth ALL that he hath, and buyeth that Field."

Brethren and sisters, we have found the Truth, and have reasoned within ourselves that the reward is something to be greatly desired, but how much progress are we making in the PURCHASE of the field? The man in the parable realizing that the treasure could only be obtained by purchasing the field was willing to sell ALL THAT HE HAD in order to obtain it. There was no pressure extended. It was a willing, free and spontaneous enterprise. He had correctly appraised the value of the treasure, and in proportion as he was making himself empty in order to make the purchase, it became more precious in his mind, for we read:

"And for joy thereof, he goeth and selleth all that he hath."

My brethren and sisters, IS THERE ENOUGH JOY OF SERVICE AMONG US? Every brother and sister will give a different price for the field but note how important the right attitude and state of mind is! "And for JOY thereof goeth and selleth ALL that he hath, and buyeth the field." We could ask ourselves: How much is the field costing US? How much of OUR substance and time are we giving to the Truth? Could it be we are keeping back part of the price? This is something for each one of us to determine. Some of us may not be satisfied with past efforts. If so, let us forget those things which are behind, and resolve that we will turn to full spiritual account the days that are before us.

CUT OFF IN HIS STRENGTH

Looking again at the life and mission of John the Baptist, there is a sense in which the prophecy of Isaiah could apply to him:

"For who shall declare his generation, for he was cut off out of the land of the living:"

John was not satisfied that one section of the nation only should hear his message. He carried the moral force of righteousness to the high places of the earth, and this cost him his life, for Herod put

him in prison, and eventually ordered his execution. Here again is an instance where God works in a way quite reverse from human expectations, that a great voice should be silenced in Israel, and a righteous man should be removed right at the time when he was at the height of his zeal, power and natural ability. We may be at a loss to understand why the firm, steady and stable hand of a brother or sister is removed by death just at the time of their greatest usefulness. We have to conclude that just as in the case of John the Baptist, their work was done and their mission accomplished. Yet it carries with it this thought—not one of us is guaranteed the full span of life, and this is added reason why we should redeem the time and work while it is called day.

A study of the record leads us to believe that John had led a sheltered and secluded life. The Holy Spirit was with him from birth, and his parents walked in the fear of the Lord and he himself a son of Levi. There comes a time in the life of us all when, like John, the wall with which we are hedged about seems to have been taken away, and the house which we have built seems to be falling around us. Surely, John must have thought he had spent his strength for naught, and the labour of his life was in vain as he waited execution in the prison, until he received the comforting assurance from the Master that the Truth of God was marching on. Sheltered and secluded indeed, yet few men have been tried so severely or sifted as completely.

THE TRUTH MARCHES ON

Brethren and Sisters, it is not all sadness and self-denial. There is the joy of fellowship, the joy of service, the joy of companionship in the Truth and the joy of expectation. Of Jesus it is written—

"Who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame." (Heb. 12:2).

Before him was suffering, tribulation and death, yet his faith and hope were so great, and his joy so full that they sustained him. Finally, my brethren and sisters, let us consider these men—Jesus and John—lest we be weary and faint in our minds. Let us endure with patience our light afflictions which are but for a moment, and gird ourselves for the work of the Truth, so that when Christ returns we may all hear that welcome voice — "Enter thou into the joy of the Lord." —W. T. 6/50 Berean
