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The Bible Student

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AN EXPOSITORY STUDY OF ST. JOHN'S GOSPEL

PROF. F. F. BRUCE, M.A.

II. Jesus Reveals Himself to the World (John 1 : 19—12 : 50)

(b) MINISTRY OF JESUS IN GALILEE, JERUSALEM AND SAMARIA

(John 2 : 1—4 : 42)

iv. John's Further Witness to Jesus (3 : 22-36)

Ch. 3, v. 22—*After these things came Jesus and His disciples into the Land of Judæa*;—This clause appears strange in the present context. Jesus has been talking to Nicodemus in Jerusalem, and Jerusalem was in Judæa; how then could He come from Jerusalem into Judæa? One solution is to suppose a displacement of verses 22-30 from an original position immediately after Ch. 2:12; in support of this it is further suggested that verses 31-36 follow more naturally on v. 21 without the nine intervening verses. But verses 22-30 should not be separated by too great an interval from Ch. 4:1 (indeed, they are so closely associated with Ch. 4:1 that an alternative transposition would place them after 3:36). If we retain the present arrangement (and there is no documentary evidence for any other) we may understand 'the land of Judæa' to mean the country district, outside the city—more particularly, perhaps, the Jordan valley near Jericho.

And there He tarried with them, and baptized.—John's Gospel is the only one of the four which ascribes a baptismal activity to Jesus during His earthly ministry; although, as is pointed out

by what Jesus was now doing. The forerunner and his preparatory work must yield precedence to the one for whom preparation is being made.

v. 29—*He that hath the bride is the bridegroom: but the friend of the bridegroom, which standeth and heareth Him, rejoiceth greatly because of the bridegroom's voice: this my joy therefore is fulfilled.*—At a wedding the 'best man' does not complain because he is not the bridegroom; he is there to assist the bridegroom and see that all goes well as the latter secures the bride of his choice. The 'best man' is satisfied if the wedding goes off successfully and the bridal couple rejoice in one another's company. So John is satisfied now that he has introduced Jesus to the faithful in Israel. The bridal language, however, may have a deeper significance than this. In Old Testament days a king (especially Israel's Divine King) was regarded as married to his people or land, and John's words probably point to Jesus as Israel's true King and Messiah. (We may compare the implication of our Lord's statement that the 'sons of the bridèchamber' cannot fast 'as long as they have the bridegroom with them' in Mark 2:19, and the vision of 'the bride, the wife of the Lamb', in Rev. 21:9.) John, as the forerunner preparing the way for Messiah's entry upon the scene, may now retire satisfied when Messiah has come and has begun to be accepted by His own.

v. 30—*He must increase, but I must decrease.*—John betrays no sense of envy or rivalry. It is not easy to see another's influence growing at the expense of one's own; it is even less easy to rejoice at the sight. But John found his joy fulfilled in the news that his disciples brought him. And these are his last recorded words in this Gospel. He came to bear witness, and all who would similarly bear witness to Christ must be prepared to say, as John did, 'He must increase, but I must decrease.' We should not suggest, as some do, that John missed the best that God had in store for him by not enrolling himself among the disciples of Jesus. 'He stood beside the gate', says one, 'but he did not enter in. He pointed out the Lamb of God to men, but he did not seek to follow Him'. No; John was sent to

bear witness to the Coming One, and right well he witnessed. And when he had completed his God-appointed service, and saw so many follow Jesus because of his testimony, he was well content. 'This my joy therefore is fulfilled. He must increase, but I must decrease'. The R.S.V. is doubtless right in printing the closing quotation-marks after these words.

v. 31—*He that cometh from above is above all*.—As earlier in the chapter the Evangelist adds his comment to Jesus' words to Nicodemus (vv. 16-21), so now (vv. 31-36) he adds his comment to the closing testimony of the Baptist. Here is the supreme reason why Jesus must increase, and John and everyone else decrease: 'He that cometh from above is above all'.

He that is of the earth is of the earth, and of the earth he speaketh.—There is no suggestion of evil here in being 'of the earth', but rather one of limitation. The witness that Jesus Himself bears is of supreme validity, because of His heavenly origin (v. 13). John's witness, excellent as it was, was subject to limitation because, although a man sent from God (Ch. 1:6), he did not come down from heaven as the Son of Man did. And here, it may be added, we have a clue to the meaning of Jesus' words that 'he that is but little in the kingdom of God' is greater than John the Baptist (Luke 7:28). For those who enter into the kingdom of God must be born from above (vv. 3, 5); they receive a share in the life of Him who, coming from above, is above all. This privilege was denied to John; he stood on the threshold of the kingdom of God as its herald, without being able to enter in himself. He was thus the last of a long line of prophets and righteous men who longed to see the kingdom of God, and died without the sight—although John came nearer to it than his predecessors, and lived long enough to learn by hearsay that it was at work in the world.

He that cometh from Heaven is above all.—This, as it stands in the R.V. text, is practically a repetition of the beginning of the verse. We prefer the variant of the R.V. margin, which omits 'is above all' at the end of the verse, and takes 'he that cometh from heaven' closely with the opening words of v. 32, reading:

'he that cometh from heaven beareth witness of what he hath seen and heard'. Westcott describes this reading as 'much more impressive' than that found in the R.V. text.

v. 32—*What he hath seen and heard, of that He beareth witness;*—The subject of these verbs, as we have just seen, is 'he that cometh from heaven'. The passage echoes v. 11: 'We speak that we do know, and bear witness of that we have seen'. The Incarnate Word is the most authoritative witness of all; He can speak of heavenly things because He descended from heaven. (See the note on 'heavenly things' in v. 12.). We recall His description as 'the faithful witness' in Rev. 1:5.

And no man receiveth His witness.—This also echoes v. 11: 'and ye receive not our witness'. In these closing verses of our chapter the Evangelist is summing up all that has been expressed or implied already about the witness of Jesus in His own words and in those of the Baptist.

v. 33—*He that hath received His witness hath set His seal to THIS, that God is true.*—There are, however, some exceptions to that sweeping statement that 'no man receiveth his witness', just as there were exceptions to the sweeping statement in Ch. 1:11 that, at the coming of the True Light, 'they that were his own received him not'. Those whose hearts are open to receive the Divine Word accept His witness; 'he that believeth on the Son of God hath the witness in himself' (1 John 5:10; the R.V. has been unwise here in not accepting Westcott and Hort's preference). And those who accept this witness by that very token acknowledge that God is true; conversely, 'he that believeth not God hath made him a liar; because he hath not believed in the witness that God hath borne concerning His Son' (1 John 5:10).

v. 34—*For He whom God hath sent speaketh the words of God:*—Here is the reason why those who accept Christ's witness attest that God is true, while those who refuse Christ's witness treat God as a liar. The witness of Christ is the message of God. God had sent other messengers to convey His words to men; the last and greatest of these was John the Baptist. But the Son

is preeminently the Sent One of God; if the prophets faithfully reproduced the message that God entrusted to them, how much more may we discern the words of God in the witness of Christ! That is why, as we read later on, all the words that Christ has spoken 'are spirit, and are life' (Ch. 6:63).

For He giveth not the spirit by measure.—It is almost, if not quite, impossible to decide whether this refers primarily to God's giving of the Spirit to Christ, or Christ's giving of the Spirit to believers. For the statement is true in either case. The prophets received the Spirit for the limited purpose of their proclamation of the word of God; the Spirit 'abides' upon Christ (Ch. 1:32, 33), as foretold in Isa. 11:2, 42:1, 61:1. But it is also true that He who has received the Spirit in this unmeasured and abiding fulness is 'he that baptizeth with the Holy Spirit' (Ch. 1:33), and it is with no niggardly hand that He dispenses the heavenly gift. His people then may become 'faithful witnesses' in their turn, telling with confidence what they too have 'seen and heard' (1 John 1:3).

v. 35—*The Father loveth the Son, and hath given all things into His hand.*—Here the verb translated 'loveth' is *agapao*; in the parallel statement in Ch. 5:20 it is *phileo*. It seems unnecessary to press any distinction between the two terms in such a context. This is a Johannine counterpart to the words of Christ in Matt. 11:27 and Luke 10:22, 'All things have been delivered unto me of my Father'. The Son is the Father's envoy plenipotentiary, His perfect spokesman and revealer.

v. 36—*He that believeth on the Son hath eternal Life:*—This simple affirmation sums up what has been said already about the new birth by which believers in Christ receive the right to become God's children (cf. Ch. 1:12 f.; 3:3 ff.). The Son has received from the Father authority to bestow spiritual life, the life of the age to come, here and now upon those who receive Him in faith and accèpt His witness.

But he that obeyeth not the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abideth on him.—Since faith in the Son of God is the only

of true nobility of character. In these words the inherent greatness of John the Baptist is seen. He was filled with the Holy Ghost from his mother's womb. There is the world's false estimate of greatness and there is the Lord's; John was great in the sight of the Lord. Greatness in the sight of the Lord is measured by a different standard from that of the world. John's greatness was foretold by an angel and attested by Christ. He was great in his undaunted witness for Christ. He was great in his self abnegation and in his loyalty to Christ.

How refreshing to come across a man like John the Baptist—too full of Christ to be ignoble! Listen to his words again: 'He must increase—I must decrease'. These are not the words of sullen acquiescence. Rather are they the words of exuberant joy. 'This therefore is my joy fulfilled'. John's preaching had shaken the nation to its depths. Not for 400 years had the voice of God's prophet been heard in the land. Now there appeared in the wilderness the greatest of all the O.T. prophets, and there the crowds came to listen to his God given message. Pharisee and Sadducee, priest and publican, scribe and soldier, all flocked to listen to the stirring accents of this strange desert preacher. His words were charged with unique power. His preaching was intensely practical, heart searching, fearless. He rebuked sin in all its chameleon forms. All listened with accusing conscience and stricken heart. Many were baptised in the Jordan confessing their sins. John was at this time the most conspicuous man in the land.

Then came another Preacher, Jesus of Nazareth; and the crowds began to desert John and follow the Saviour. When reminded of this fact no ignoble jealousy stirred in the breast of the Baptist. He loved the Saviour too much to enter into any rivalries with Him. He was content, yea more than content, to have it so: 'He must *increase* and I must *decrease*'! He was supremely content that 'his little light should be swallowed up in the boundless dawn'. Are we like John? What is God's estimate of our life and service? Does He see in us 'less of self and more of Christ'? Blessed are we if He does!

Yet there is still a higher plane of Christian living, for Paul points us to loftier heights.

None of self and all of Christ

Paul said: 'Not I but Christ'. Could human lips utter greater words than these? Here is the acme of all Christian experience. Higher none can climb. But comparatively few reach this lofty summit. It is gloriously *possible* but supremely *costly*! Someone once said: 'The entrance fee into the kingdom of God is *nothing*, but the annual subscription is *everything*'. If we are to be all that Christ wants us to be we must place all on the altar. He must be Lord of all. He must reign without a rival in the believer's heart; 'each thought and each temper beneath His control'.

Paul gladly acknowledged Christ as his liege Lord. It is only as we also are obedient to 'every dear command' of His that we can experience the fulness of the redemptive work of Christ. God desires that *all* His people should be fully dedicated to Him. He will be satisfied with nothing less than a perfect obedience. He must sway the sceptre of sovereignty over every department of our complex life. Nothing in our lives must rebel against His authority. He must be Supreme. Christ died not only to put away sin but to break its chain; not only to remove its curse but to break its sceptre.

His life is the pattern of the truly devoted life. His life was utterly dedicated to the glory of God. Never was such a life so united within itself to one supreme end. In all things He yielded a perfect obedience to His Father. Neither fear of foe or flattery of friend tempted Him aside. Undistracted He moved along the pathway of implicit obedience: He demands a like obedience from us. He desires that His life be reproduced in us. He must reign without a rival in the heart if He is to demonstrate in us the saving fulness of His work on the cross. His heart will not be satisfied with less. Then He will be able to teach us something of life's supremacies.

This informed and unreserved loyalty to Him in all things is what the Christian personally and the church collectively so sorely need today. Everywhere subtle siren voices are seeking to detach us from our love and loyalty to the Saviour. Many a warrior on battle field and battle ship has perished to keep the flag proudly

flying: they were content to make the supreme sacrifice in doing so. Can we be content with a lesser devotion to duty? Loyal service will mean selfless service. The life of unswerving loyalty to Christ will result in a life of enrichment in vital spiritual power, 'We shall be more than conquerors'. Alas, in the Christian ranks today the groan of defeat is heard oftener than the shout of victory. But there is in Christ all the spiritual dynamic to give intensity and strength to every exercise of life. No man can have the slightest influence for God without that spiritual power. A Christian has power and influence in his service for God only in proportion as he allows the Christ of God the throne of his heart. How Christ longs to demonstrate in our poor feeble lives His power and greatness but we hinder Him because we offer Him a few 'furnished apartments' instead of crowning Him Lord of all! If we give him the throne of our hearts His sceptre will crush every selfish passion and all His enactments will be for our supreme good. Is He Lord of our lives? If not, then

Bring forth the royal diadem
And crown Him Lord of all.

NEBUCHADNEZZAR

Giant of Babylon

DR W. M. CLOW

From the hills of Northern Syria to the Persian Gulf there stretches a vast, hollow plain. Through it there flow the Tigris and the Euphrates, and its central valley is named in Scripture, Mesopotamia. Today all is waste and silence. The Arab traders cross it in caravans to find its one emporium in Baghdad. They pass the ruins of its great cities, with wonder at the energy and curiosity of Western archaeologists who are unearthing their buried relics. At one time that wilderness land was the focus of the world's life. It was the cradle of the human race, and the traditional site of the Garden of Eden. It had seats of learning whose scholars accounted other nations as little better than barbarians. Abraham studied astronomy in Ur of the Chaldees before a single stone of Athens was laid. The Wise Men from