

Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit.

JESUS AND HIS FORERUNNER.

A Sermon

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DELIVERED BY

C. H. SPURGEON,

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“Therefore they sought again to take him: but he escaped out of their hand, and went away again beyond Jordan into the place where John at first baptized; and there he abode. And many resorted unto him, and said, John did no miracle: but all things that John spake of this man were true. And many believed on him there.”—John x. 39—42.

THE unbelieving and infuriated Jews again and again took up stones to cast at our Lord, and here they sought to take him prisoner, but he escaped from them, apparently with the greatest possible ease. He did this on several occasions. When the men of Nazareth would have cast him down headlong from the brow of the hill whereon their city was built, he passed through the midst of them, and went his way. He made his escape, over and over again, in the same wonderful manner, thus proving that he was not in the power of any man. He need not, therefore, at the last, have died unless his death had been in accordance with his own will. He might have besought his Father, and he would have given him legions of angels for his deliverance; or he might, as Elijah did, have called for fire from heaven to destroy those who sought to arrest him. His divine power would never have been at any loss in providing means for his own protection. He might, readily enough, have slain those who came to take him in the garden; and he might even have come down from the cross, if he had pleased thus to prove what power he possessed. Yet he did not so act, but voluntarily laid down his life, according to his own words, “I lay down my life, that I might take it again. No man taketh it from me, but I lay it down of myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again. This commandment have I received of my Father.” Let us, then, bless and praise him for that wondrous, voluntary, substitutionary death upon the tree. It was for our sins that he suffered. There was no reason for his death except that which was found in our dire necessities and in his own great heart of love. Whenever we think of the sufferings

of Christ upon the cross, let us remember how spontaneous was the sacrifice by which he redeemed us from sin, and death, and hell. Blessed, for ever blessed, be the name of this willing Friend of guilty men; and let us, in similar fashion, always be ready to serve him. Let the willingness of Christ bring forth willingness in us; let us not be as bullocks unaccustomed to the yoke, but cheerfully let us take his yoke upon us, and learn of him. May the Lord grant us grace, not merely to be willing, but even to be eager for his service, as he was eager to serve us, for he could truly say, "I have a baptism to be baptized with; and how am I straitened till it be accomplished!"

Another thought is suggested by our Lord's action. When he was driven from one place by the unbelief and malice of his adversaries, he did not therefore retire from his service altogether. If he could not speak to the people in the streets of Jerusalem, he would find a place of audience in the desert beyond Jordan; but, somewhere or other, he would be seeking the welfare of men. He went about doing good. They could not stop his mouth, whatever they might do. When they, again and again, in one place, took up stones to stone him, he saw that his testimony would be useless to them, for it had already only increased their condemnation; so he went off to another place, away from those furious persecutors, that others might listen to the message of mercy which they had despised and rejected. Jesus was always working, always teaching, always blessing; and, to this day, he is still diligent in his service on behalf of the sons of men. From the highest throne of glory, with both hands he scatters down mercies and favours, by day and by night, upon us his unworthy creatures. As he continues thus to serve us, let us continue to serve him; and if he be unwearied, let us be unwearied, too. If we can do little or nothing for him in one place, let us find another spot where we can serve him; but never let us lay down our charge till we also lay down our lives, never let us cease to work until we cease to live. May this mind be in us which was also in Christ Jesus our Lord!

I. Now to come more closely to the subject of this evening's meditation, the first thing that I see in the text is A FRUITFUL PLACE OF MINISTRY: "Beyond Jordan." Our Saviour preached in the place where John at first baptized, "and many believed on him there."

It is not every place that is fruitful, for there are some portions of the field, which is the world, that are like the wayside where the birds of the air come and catch away the seed as soon as it is sown. There are other parts where the soil is very shallow, and there the seed springs up only to perish in the heat of the sun. Our Saviour had been in many places where he was unsuccessful as a preacher, where he was absolutely rejected of men, and his message altogether despised; for, when he spoke the truth, they even called it blasphemy, and took up stones that they might stone him as one unfit to live. Christian ministers may have to work in such places, yet they are always glad when they get on the soil that yields a hundred-fold. They are delighted if their Master

bids them cast the net where there are great shoals of fishes. Our Saviour was evidently in such a spot when he was preaching "beyond Jordan."

Notice about this place, first, that *it was a place of retreat from persecution*. I do not think that we should ever look upon the most violent opposition to the gospel as anything to be altogether lamented; for, even in this instance, it is just after the Jews have said that Christ blasphemed, and have sought to stone or to seize him, that he is most successful in his preaching. You may regard it as a very safe rule that, when the devil roars, it is because he has been hit pretty hard; and that, whenever there is the most rage against the gospel, it is one evidence of the gospel's growing power. To go and preach in a town, or village, or hamlet, and to be scarcely noticed,—to deliver your testimony for Christ, and yet to produce no visible effect of any kind,—is horrible; but if all the hosts of hell are stirred up against you, and men even begin to act despitefully to the preacher, you may take courage, and rest assured that something is being done. Depend upon it, there would not be all that stir and uproar unless the Lord's power had gone with his Word to the hearts and consciences of men. We are not to cease our preaching because of opposition, but we are then to be more earnest and zealous than ever;—possibly, in another place, as it was in our Lord's case;—but, still, somewhere our testimony for our Lord is to be given. After the thunderstorm will often be the very best time for sowing the good seed of the kingdom. It was so in our Saviour's experience, for he had there a most fruitful season after he had met with the most violent and bitter opposition.

If I am addressing any servant of God who has been passing through a season of fierce persecution, let him be encouraged. Brother, when the night is over, the day will be all the brighter because of the blackness that preceded it; so, be you hopeful that, after the wearing and wearying time of opposition that you have had, you will come into smoother waters, and that God will bless you yet more abundantly.

Perhaps another reason why that place was so fruitful was, *because it was a retired spot*. It was "beyond Jordan." It was away from the noise and strife of Jerusalem. Those who were there had evidently travelled a considerable distance with the desire to hear the Saviour. In the streets of Jerusalem, Jesus preached to many who did not want to hear; and we must do the same, for we are to preach the gospel to every creature; but, I think, we have the best hope of doing good when people take trouble to come to hear us, when they journey for miles to the place of preaching, when they are removed from their ordinary associations, and feel that they can in quiet listen to the Word. Chrysostom once preached a sermon upon the last verse of my text, dwelling specially upon the word "*there*"—"many believed on him *there*." Very singularly, he accounts for the larger numbers of women who are converted, beyond the number of men, from the fact that women are more at home than men are, and have more quiet times for reflection and considera-

tion upon the Word. I lay no stress upon that thought, but it has occurred to me also, and when I met with it in Chrysostom, I thought that there might be some force about it, for we do need quiet times in which we can think of divine things. Some of you men are busy all day long,—up in the morning early, and then right on till late at night. You are hacking and tearing away about your worldly business, and you do not get time to sit down, and calmly calculate this problem, “What shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?” Let me persuade you sometimes to go into the desert, and rest a while. Surely, heaven is worth a little thought if it is to be gained; it must be worth while to secure the needful time for thought about how we are to escape from hell, and to be delivered from sin. I think that, if you—especially on Sabbath afternoons, between the morning and evening services,—I mean, you unconverted people,—would set apart an hour or even half an hour really to look into your case, to come to close dealings with yourselves and your God, we should preach, in the evening, with very great hope of blessing, because such hearers would have come to us prepared and anxious to learn the way of salvation. Do you not know that, when you go to a place of worship, you will generally catch what you fish for? Some of you come because the preacher is thought to be eccentric; you will, possibly, hear something which will confirm you in that idea. But, if you come because you want to hear of Jesus Christ, and to find salvation, you will get what you come for; it is the will of the Lord that those who seek shall find. I think there is something very suggestive in the fact that this fruitful place was a quiet spot away from the crowds and bustle of Jerusalem.

And, again, one reason why our Lord was so successful on this occasion when many believed on him was, no doubt, that *he had a large congregation*. It is first said that “many resorted unto him,” and then that “many believed on him.” It is a self-evident fact that you cannot have many converts if you do not have many hearers. Hence, we delight to see the house of prayer crowded. We are glad that, when we cast the net, we cast it among multitudes of fishes. If a man can preach the gospel to half a dozen people, he ought to do it with all his might; and if God should give him the souls of that half dozen hearers, it will be an abundant reward for him. But if there be any means by which half a dozen thousands of people can be brought to hear the Word, we may hope that the converts will be multiplied in equal proportion if God the Holy Spirit is pleased to bless the Word. At any rate, the greater the number of the preacher’s hearers, the greater is the likelihood of blessing to a large number of people. This puts an end, I think, to the foolish talk about the finest thought of the age being always delivered to an *élite* company of very few special individuals. If you preach with great thoughtfulness, especially after the style of the modern school of thought, you cannot expect that the multitude will come to hear you. Very well, then, let us not preach in that way; for “the greatest good to the greatest number” should be the motto of every man who loves his race, and desires its highest well-being. Let us endeavour

to so adapt our style, if we are preachers of the Word, that the multitude will be willing to hear, and will be able to understand, for then we may hope that, with the blessing of God, many will be converted.

But, once more, our Lord had met with a fruitful place *because it was a place of fragrant memories*. For what was that spot "beyond Jordan" already noted? It was "the place where John at first baptized,"—where, in fact, Jesus himself had been baptized by John. We believe not in the sacredness of places; but, still, where a good man has laboured for the Master, there often lingers a holy fragrance which is a means of blessing to others. Many of those people had probably heard John's testimony to his Lord, and the trees by the river's edge, and the flowing stream, would always remind them of the Baptist, who there urged them to repent of their sins. Now the good man is dead and buried, but the soil which he had ploughed is the better prepared for the Master's seed-sowing, and the Master knows that he will have all the greater harvest in that place because John has been there before him. O my brothers and sisters, it will be a grand thing for us so to have lived that, when we are dead and gone, those who come after us will have all the easier task because of our service for the Saviour! You Sunday-school teachers are often like John the Baptist; you get the youthful minds ready for the preacher's instruction; and you, who have, perhaps, been preaching for years without success, may, nevertheless, be John the Baptists to others who will come after you, and who may be the means of blessing to those for whom you think you have laboured in vain. When I go to some places to preach, I feel that I am sowing upon stony ground; but if the preacher before me has wept over his hearers, and pleaded with them, and prayed for them, I find that they are as ready to drink in the Word as the thirsty soil drinks in the rain when the blessed clouds end the long and terrible drought.

II. Now, secondly, in our text you will see **A TESTIMONY TO A DEPARTED MINISTER.**

The people said, as they stood where John had preached and baptized, "John did no miracle: but all things that John spake of this man were true." Oh, how I hope that you will be able to say this of me when I have gone the way of all flesh! "He did no miracle: but all that he said concerning Christ was true." There are some preachers, of whom people will say, when they are gone, "They were not very eloquent, they were not very learned, they were not very refined, they could not do any miracles; but"—oh, that blessed "*but*"!—"but all things that they spake concerning Christ were true."

Notice the character which the people gave to John, three years, or thereabouts, after he was dead. He was still remembered by them, and they bore most satisfactory testimony concerning him. First, *they testified that he spoke concerning Christ*. It was John's business, it was all his business here below, to speak concerning Jesus Christ; and he did it so thoroughly that this was the one thing that his hearers recalled after he was gone. He rebuked the Pharisees and Sadducees, but his main work was to testify concerning him who was to come after him, whose shoe's latchet he felt that he

was not worthy to unloose. Ah! brethren, there is no ministry that will stand the testing on a sick-bed, or on our death-bed, except that which has been full of testimony to Christ. When there has been a great deal of philosophy, and only a homœopathic dose of Christ in the preaching,—just enough of the latter to give it the name of Christian teaching,—may God have mercy upon both preacher and hearer! But to preach Christ first, Christ last, Christ midst, Christ always, this is what John the Baptist did, and this is what all preachers should do. An American gentleman, who was here many years ago, came again about fourteen or fifteen years afterwards, and he said to me as he went out, “I see you are still on the old tack.” “Yes,” I replied, “I intend to be like Casabianca on the burning ship, where his father had told him to stand, and where he meant to remain as long as life should last.” I will preach new doctrine when I find it in the Bible; till then, I will keep to the old. The State of Massachusetts passed a resolution declaring that it would be governed by the laws of God until there was time to make any better ones, and I have passed a resolution that I will preach Christ's gospel until I have time to find out something better, and that can never be, for it is the only gospel that can ever meet the needs of the human race. There was no bite from any of the fiery serpents which a look at the brazen serpent could not cure; and this gospel of God's grace is the one remedy for all the spiritual diseases to which mankind is heir, and therefore we will cling to it as long as we live.

John the Baptist spoke concerning Christ, and *what he said about Christ was true*. That is the important point, for it is possible for Christ to be preached, and yet for the truth about Christ not to be preached. His humanity may be left out, or his Deity may be kept in the background, or there may be lispings and hesitancy with regard to the doctrine of his atoning sacrifice; and if this is the case, then the ministry will be without power. It used to be said, of a certain noted preacher, that his doctrine of the atonement was, that Jesus Christ did something or other, which, in some way or other, was connected with our salvation. That cloudy sort of teaching is not preaching Christ in truth; but to declare that he was made a curse for us,—that the Lord caused to meet upon him the iniquity of all who believe in him,—that he, who knew no sin, was made sin for us, that we might be made the righteousness of God in him,—to clearly preach the definite substitution of Christ on our behalf,—this is to tell the truth about Christ; and I pray that all of us, whether preachers or teachers, may not only speak about Christ, but also, like John the Baptist, speak the truth about him.

One other thing about John was that *all he said about Christ was the truth*: “All things that John spake of this man were true.” Not merely some things, but “all things.” Any part of Christ is precious, but a whole Christ is what the sinner wants. As far as we know him, we are bound honestly to make him known to others; and even if we have to do it with but small ability, and if, when we die, we have to regret that we had such slender powers, yet shall it be a sweet thought to us if we know that those we leave behind will be able to say, “All things that he spake concerning this man were true.”

There was one thing which the people did not say, and which they had no need to say, because it was self-evident; that is, that *John the Baptist had so preached Christ that they could not forget it.* He had been dead some years, yet they recollected what he had preached about while he was with them. They remembered how he preached it, too,—that he preached Christ in truth, and that all he said about Christ was the truth; so that, when the Messiah himself stood before them, the savour of John's ministry was still fresh upon them. Oh, that it might be our lot, and the lot of all God's servants, to make the gospel arrows stick as well as strike, and to cause men to carry with them, for many a year, the remembrance of the things which we have spoken unto them while we were yet present with them!

III. Now, thirdly, I am going away from the text in order to notice WHAT THE DEPARTED MINISTER'S TESTIMONY REALLY WAS. What did John say concerning Christ?

Well, first of all, *John said that Jesus was the Son of God.* His testimony was, "I saw, and bare record that this is the Son of God." John delighted to extol his Lord; he felt that he was not worthy to take the place of the slave who took off his master's sandals; it was too great an honour for him to be the body-servant of Christ. How sweetly did John speak about Jesus as "the only-begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father"! Do you all believe that blessed truth of the sonship of Christ? Do you all believe that the man of Nazareth was "very God of very God"? If you do, then trust him to be your Saviour; and, doing so, you shall be saved by him. Let the testimony of John be accepted by you, for it is now borne out by the life of Christ, and a thousand proofs besides. Jesus of Nazareth is God in human flesh; trust yourselves with him, and you shall be eternally saved.

John also bore witness to another grand truth about his Lord and Master, namely, that *he was the Lamb of God.* How plainly he cried to all the people, and afterwards to his own disciples, "Behold the Lamb of God!" Had John the paschal lamb in his mind's eye? Very likely he had. "This," said he, "is the Lamb of God, whose blood is to be shed to preserve his people, just as the blood of the paschal lamb, when it was sprinkled upon the lintel and the two side-posts of the houses in Egypt, saved the Israelites when the destroying angel had unsheathed his terrible sword." O dear hearers, I would that you would all receive Christ as the great Sin-offering,—the only Preserver and Defender against the destroying angel in the day of God's wrath!

But did John, think you, have that passage in the fifty-third of Isaiah in his mind, "He is brought as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so he openeth not his mouth"? When he said, "Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world," do you not think that he had in his mind that passage, "The Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all"? It is extremely likely that this was the case. This was a choice topic for John to dilate upon, and we would dilate upon it, too, if we had the time; but, as we have only a few minutes left, we cry to you, "Behold the Lamb of God!" That Jesus, who is now reigning in heaven at his

Father's right hand, suffered in the room, and place, and stead of all who will believe in him. Behold him! Look unto him, and be ye saved. If you trust in him, you will thereby prove that your sin was laid upon him; and if so, all that sin of yours has been put away by his sacrifice of himself. Why do you not trust him? May the Holy Spirit bring you to do so, for John's testimony was true when he said that Jesus was the Lamb of God.

John also bore witness, concerning Christ, as *the Baptizer with the Holy Ghost and with fire*; and this, too, is true. Any of you, who have trusted Christ, know into what sacred fire he plunges your spirit, so that it refines and purifies your soul, and burns up all the dross. He immerses us into the Holy Spirit, so that we are—

“Plunged in the Godhead's deepest sea,
And lost in his immensity.”

And, once more, *John called Jesus the Bridegroom*. That is one of his sweetest names. John spoke of himself as the Bridegroom's friend, or best man; he was that, but nothing more, so his work was done when the Bridegroom came. O beloved, the Lord Jesus Christ, by his love to his Church, has proved himself to be her true Bridegroom! Out of his side was she taken when he fell asleep, even as Eve was taken out of the side of Adam, and to her his love ever goes forth, for he says to her, “Thou art bone of my bone, and flesh of my flesh.” For this purpose did he leave his Father, that he might cleave unto his Church, that they twain might be one. Truly does Paul write, “Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it; that he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the Word, that he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish.” This is another grand truth for us to talk about,—the union of Christ with his Church,—the blessed bonds that bind him to us, and us to him, so that we are able to defy the whole universe to “separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

IV. I have thus given you a summary of what John's testimony concerning Jesus was, and of which the people said, “All things that John spake of this man were true.” Now, the last thing I have to speak upon is, **THE BLESSED RESULT**. Our Lord was preaching in a fruitful place, he was following a man who had left a precious memory behind him, and that memory was all about himself. What was the result?

First, *the people standing on that spot, where John had stood, began to consider*. “John said so-and-so about the promised Messiah; this man exactly answers to the description that John gave. All men acknowledge that John was a prophet, so what he said concerning Jesus is clearly true, and he must, therefore, be the Christ whom God has sent into the world. He must be the Son of God, the Lamb of God, the One who is to baptize us with the Holy Ghost and with fire;” and, therefore, after careful consideration, they believed in him. Beloved hearers, have you ever given due consideration to divine things? It would be worth while for you, who are unsaved,

not to do any more business until you are saved. You are very "cute" and clever about worldly things; but I tell you, solemnly, that you are great fools with regard to your immortal souls. I am certain that, if the life of any one of you were, at this moment, in peril from some very dreadful disease, you would not wait long without seeking the best advice concerning it that you could afford. If you were told, while I am preaching, that your house was on fire, you would not stop till I had finished the sermon; you would be off home at once, so concerned are you, and rightly so, about these earthly things. Yet your souls are even now abiding under the wrath of God. You dare not say you do not believe that; yet you do not really believe it, or you act in a way which implies that you do not. Suppose your breath were to stop for one minute, where would you be? Where you would ask in vain for a drop of water to cool your parched tongue. Every instant, life is in jeopardy; let some one of the ten thousand strings of this poor harp but snap,—and harp-strings often do snap,—and the soul must appear before its God,—unready, unwashed, unclothed, for ever lost. O beloved, do as these people "beyond Jordan" did; begin to consider, see whether Christ be not the Son of God, and the Lamb of God; and if he be, believe in him, trust him with your souls, and so find eternal salvation.

Further, having considered, *these people did believe on Jesus*; that is to say, they did accept him as the Lamb of God, and the Son of God. They did receive him as the Bridegroom of their hearts, they did believe that he would baptize them with the Holy Ghost and with fire; and so they were saved. Will not the same result follow this service? Will not some of you believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, who is so worthy of confidence,—yea, who demands that we believe in him, for this is what he says, "He that believeth not shall be damned"? It is said, in our text, "*Many believed on him.*" I will be thankful if only two or three believe on Jesus Christ, yet I cannot be content unless many believe on him. He is so true that it is a grievous crime to doubt him. He is so abundantly able to save that it is the greatest folly not to trust him. It sometimes puzzles me how God can have such patience with unbelievers. When he has given his only-begotten Son to bleed and die for the guilty, and he says, "This is my well-beloved Son, bleeding and dying for you, only trust him,"—if men say that they will not, what can be conceived of more horrible than that, and what clearer proof can there be of the desperate malignity of the human heart that it will not even accept the Son of God himself when he comes dressed in robes of love to save mankind?

I finish with the last word of my text: "*Many believed on him there*;" that is, on the spot where he then stood and preached. I would to God that many would believe on Jesus Christ in this Tabernacle, *there* in the area, or in that aisle, or up in the galleries. Alas, many say, "We will go home, and think about it." Do not do that. Believe on him *there*. I know how apt you are to indulge in idle chat on your way home. I know how, at the supper-table, too often the Word which you have heard is driven away by the foolish talk

which is unfit for the Sabbath. The devil only wants you to wait, for he knows that he can then come and steal away the good seed of the kingdom; but if the Lord should give you the grace to decide for him at once, if you were to believe on Jesus now, what joy there would be among the angels, and the spirits of just men made perfect! They would "ring the bells of heaven," and rejoice over lost ones found. What peace there would be in your own heart; and what thankfulness and delight there would be among the people of God when they heard of it! You Christians, try to get a quiet, earnest talk with the unconverted, if you can, before they get away from this building. It may be that they will be led by you to believe on Jesus here and now. God grant that it may be so, for our Lord Jesus Christ's sake! Amen.

Exposition by C. H. Spurgeon.

MATTHEW III. 1—12; JOHN I. 15—37; AND III. 22—36.

We are going to read three passages relating to John the Baptist's testimony concerning Christ.

Matthew iii. Verses 1—4. In those days came John the Baptist, preaching in the wilderness of Judæa, and saying, Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand. For this is he that was spoken of by the prophet Esaias, saying, The voice of one crying in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. And the same John had his raiment of camel's hair, and a leathern girdle about his loins; and his meat was locusts and wild honey.

Everything connected with John the Baptist was in harmony with his message. He was the preacher of repentance, so the place where he preached was most suitable; it was in the wilderness, where there was nothing to distract his hearers' attention, as there would have been in crowded cities. His dress was striking, and everything about him, even down to the food that he ate, went to show that he was the rough pioneer preacher preparing the way for his Master. John did not teach the fulness of joy and peace; that was left for our Lord Jesus to proclaim; but John came to prepare the way of the Lord by preaching repentance.

5. Then went out to him Jerusalem, and all Judæa, and all the region round about Jordan,

There seems to have been, about that time, a widespread anticipation of the coming of the Messiah; so, no sooner did the news come that a prophet was preaching in the desert, than great multitudes went out to hear him.

6—8. And were baptized of him in Jordan, confessing their sins. But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees come to his baptism, he said unto them, O generation of vipers, who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bring forth therefore fruits meet for repentance:

Did he not speak after the style of the prophet Elijah? Yet those bold speeches of his were not at all stronger than the evils of the age required. When the self-righteous Pharisees and the sceptical Sadducees—the Ritualists and the "modern thought" men of that day—came to him to be baptized, he welcomed them not, but bade them "bring forth fruits meet for repentance," evidences of a change of heart and life.

9. And think not to say within yourselves, We have Abraham to our father: for I say unto you, that God is able of these stones—

In the bed of Jordan, where he was baptizing,—