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Curtis Tocqueville Gogol Busch
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John the Baptist

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JOHN THE BAPTIST

by

F. B. MEYER, B.A.

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Paul: A Servant of Jesus Christ

The Prophet of Hope

Saved and Kept

etc., etc

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By Rev. F. B. MEYER, B.A.

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JOHN THE BAPTIST.

PAUL: A Servant of Jesus Christ.

Preface.

The life and character of John the Baptist have always had a great fascination for me; and I am thankful to have been permitted to write this book. But I am more thankful for the hours of absorbing interest spent in the study of his portraiture as given in the Gospels. I know of nothing that makes so pleasant a respite from the pressure of life's fret and strain, as to bathe mind and spirit in the translucent waters of Scripture biography.

As the clasp between the Old Testament and the New—the close of the one and the beginning of the other; as among the greatest of those born of women; as the porter who opened the door to the True Shepherd; as the fearless rebuker of royal and shameless sin—the Baptist must ever compel the homage and admiration of mankind.

In many respects, such a life cannot be repeated. But the spirit of humility and courage; of devotion to God, and uncompromising loyalty to truth, which was so conspicuous in him, may animate us. We, also, may be filled with the spirit and power of Elijah, as he was; and may point, with lip and life, to the Saviour of the world, crying, "Behold the Lamb of God."

JOHN THE BAPTIST.

I.

The Interest of his Biography.

"John, than which man a sadder or a greater
Not till this day has been of woman born;
John, like some iron peak by the Creator
Fired with the red glow of the rushing morn.

"This, when the sun shall rise and overcome it,
Stands in his shining, desolate and bare;
Yet not the less the inexorable summit
Flamed him his signal to the happier air."
F. W. H. MYERS.

John and Jesus – Contemporary History – Anticipation of the Advent.

The morning star, shining amid the brightening glow of dawn, is the fittest emblem that Nature can supply of the herald who proclaimed the rising of the Sun of Righteousness – answering across the gulf of three hundred years to his brother prophet, Malachi, who had foretold that Sunrise and the healing in His wings.

Every sign attests the unique and singular glory of the Baptist. Not that his career was signalized by the blaze of prodigy and wonder, like the multiplication of the widow's meal or the descent of the fire of heaven to consume the altar and the wood; for it is expressly said that "John did no miracle." Not that he owed anything to the

adventitious circumstances of wealth and rank; for he was not a place-loving courtier, "clothed in soft raiment or found in kings' courts." Not that he was a master of a superb eloquence like that of Isaiah or Ezekiel; for he was content to be only "a cry" — short, thrilling, piercing through the darkness, ringing over the desert plains. Yet, his Master said of him that "among them that are born of women there hath not risen a greater than John the Baptist"; and in six brief months, as one has noticed, the young prophet of the wilderness had become the centre to which all the land went forth. We see Pharisees and Sadducees, soldiers and publicans, enthralled by his ministry; the Sanhedrim forced to investigate his claims; the petty potentates of Palestine caused to tremble on their thrones; while he has left a name and an influence that will never cease out of the world.

But there is a further feature which arrests us in the life and ministry of the Baptist. He was ordained to be "the clasp" of two covenants. In him Judaism reached its highest embodiment, and the Old Testament found its noblest exponent. It is significant, therefore, that through his lips the law and the prophets should announce their transitional purpose, and that he who caught up the torch of Hebrew prophecy with a grasp and spirit unrivalled by any before him, should have it in his power and in his heart to say: "The object of all prophecy, the purpose of the Mosaic law, the end of all sacrifices, the desire of all nations, is at hand." And forthwith turning to the True Shepherd, who stood at the door waiting to be admitted, to Him the porter opened, bowing low as He passed, and crying: "This is He of whom Moses in the law and the prophets did write, Jesus of Nazareth, who was for to come."

Few studies can bring out to clearer demonstration the superlative glory of Christ than a thoughtful consideration of the story of the forerunner. They were born at the same time; were surrounded from their birth by similar circumstances; drank in from their earliest days the same patriotic aspirations, the same sacred traditions, the same glowing hopes. But the parallel soon stops. John the Baptist is certainly a grand embodiment of the noblest characteristics of the Jewish people. We see in him a conspicuous example of what could be developed out of eight hundred years of Divine revelation and discipline. But Jesus is the Son of Man: there is a width, a

breadth, a universality about Him which cannot be accounted for save on the hypothesis which John himself declared, that "He who cometh from above is above all."

In each case, life was strenuous and short—an epoch being inaugurated, in the one case in about six months, in the other some three years. In each case, at first, there was abounding enthusiasm, bursting forth around their persons as they announced the Kingdom of God, like the flowers which carpet their own fair land after the rains; but side by side the unconcealed hatred of the religious world of their time. In each case, the brief sunny hours of service were soon succeeded by the rolling up of the thunderous clouds, and these by the murderous tempest of deadly hatred, even unto death: "Their dead bodies lay in the street of the great city, which spiritually is called Sodom and Egypt." In each case, there was a little handful of detached disciples, who bitterly mourned their master's death, and took up the desecrated corpse to lay it in the tomb; whilst they that dwelt in the earth rejoiced and made merry, and sent gifts to one another, because they had been tormented by their words (Rev. xi. 10).

But there the parallel ends. The life purpose of the one culminated in his death; with the other, it only began. In the case of John, death was a martyrdom, which shines brilliantly amid the murky darkness of his time; in the case of Jesus, death was a sacrifice which put away the sin of the world. For John there was no immediate resurrection, save that which all good men have of their words and influence; but his Master saw no corruption—it was not possible for Him to be holden by it—and in his resurrection He commenced to wield his wide and mighty supremacy over human hearts and wills. When the axe of Herod's executioner had done its deadly work in the dungeons of Machaerus, the bond which knit the disciples of John was severed also, and they were absorbed in the followers of Christ; but when the Roman soldiers thought their work was done, and the cry "It is finished!" had escaped the parched lips of the dying Lord, his disciples held together in the upper room, and continued there for more than forty days, until the descent of the Holy Spirit formed them into the strongest organization that this world has ever beheld.

John's influence on the world has diminished as men have receded further from his age; but Jesus is King of the ages. He creates, He fashions, He leads them forth; He is with us always, to the end of the age. We have not to go back through the centuries to find Him in the cradle or in Mary's arms, in the fishing-boat or on the mountain, on the cross or in the grave; He is *here* beside us, with us, in us, "all the days." John, then, was "a burning and shining torch," lifted for a moment aloft in the murky air; but Jesus was THAT LIGHT. As the star-light, which fails to illumine the page of your book or the dial-plate of your watch, is to the sunlight, as the courier is to the sovereign, as the streamlet is to the ocean—such was John as compared with Him whose shoe-latchet he felt himself unworthy to stoop down and unloose. Greatest born of women he might be; "sent from God" he was: but One came after him who bore upon his front the designation of his Divine origin and mission, behind whom the gates of the past closed as when a king has passed through, and at whose girdle hang the keys of the doors and gates of the Ages.

To read the calm idyllic pages of the Gospels, apart from some knowledge of contemporary history, is to miss one of their deepest lessons—that such piety and beneficence were set in the midst of a most tumultuous and perilous age. Those times were by no means favourable to the cultivation of the deepest life. The flock of God had long left the green pastures and still waters of outward peace, and were passing through the valley of death-shadow, every step of the path being infested by the enemies of their peace. The wolf, indeed, was coming. The national life was already being rent by those throes of agony which betokened the passing away of an age, and reached their climax in the Fall of Jerusalem, of which Jesus said there had been nothing, and would be nothing, like it in the history of the world.

Herod was on the throne—crafty, cruel, sensual, imperious, and magnificent. The gorgeous Temple which bore his name was the scene of priestly service and sacramental rites. The great national feasts of the Passover, of Tabernacles, and of Pentecost, were celebrated with solemn pomp, and attracted vast crowds from all the world. In every part of the land synagogues were maintained with punctilious care, and crowds of scribes were perpetually engaged in

a microscopic study of the law, and in the instruction of the people. In revenue, and popular attention, and apparent devoutness, that period had not been excelled in the most palmy days of Solomon or Hezekiah. But beneath this decorous surface the rankest, foulest, most desperate corruption throve.

To the aged couple in the hill-country of Judaea, as to Mary and Joseph at Nazareth, must have come tidings of the murder of Aristobulus, of the cruel death of Mariamne and her sons, and of the aged Hyrcanus. They must have groaned beneath the grinding oppression by which Herod extorted from the poorer classes the immense revenues which he squandered on his palaces and fortresses and on the creation of new cities. That he was introducing everywhere Gentile customs and games; that he had dared to place the Roman eagle on the main entrance of the Temple; that he had pillaged David's tomb; that he had set aside the great council of their nation, and blinded the saintly Jochanan; that the religious leaders, men like Caiaphas and Annas, were quite willing to wink at the crimes of the secular power, so long as their prestige and emoluments were secured; that the national independence for which Judas and his brothers had striven, during the Maccabean wars, was fast being laid at the feet of Rome, which was only too willing to take advantage of the chaos which followed immediately upon Herod's hideous death—such tidings must have come, in successive shocks of anguish, to those true hearts who were waiting for the redemption of Israel, with all the more eagerness as it seemed so long delayed, so urgently needed. Still, they made their yearly journeys to Jerusalem, and participated in the great convocations, which, in outward splendour, eclipsed memories of the past; but they realized that the glory had departed, and that the mere husk of externalism could not long resist the incoming tides of militarism, of the love of display, and the corrupting taint of the worst aspects of Roman civilization. When the feasts were over, these pious hearts turned back to their homes among the hills, tearing themselves from the last glimpse of the beautiful city, with the cry, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem!"

The darkest hour precedes the dawn, and it was just at this point that Old Testament predictions must have been so eagerly scanned by those that watched and waited. That the Messiah was nigh, they

could not doubt. The term of years foretold by Daniel had nearly expired. The sceptre had departed from Judah, and the lawgiver from between his feet. Even the Gentile world was penetrated with the expectation of a King. Sybils in their ancient writings, hermits in their secret cells, Magi studying the dazzling glories of the eastern heavens, had come to the conclusion that He was at hand who would bring again the Golden Age.

And so those loyal and loving souls that often spake together, while the Lord hearkened and heard, must have felt that as the advent of the Lord whom they sought was nigh, that of his messenger must be nearer still. They started at every footfall. They listened for every voice. They scanned the expression of every face. "Behold, he shall come," rang in their hearts like a peal of silver bells. At any moment might a voice be heard crying, "Cast up, cast up the highway; gather out the stones; lift up an ensign for the peoples. Say ye to the daughter of Sion, Behold, thy salvation cometh." Those anticipations were realized in the birth of John the Baptist.

II.

The House of Zacharias.

(LUKE I.)

"There are in this loud stunning tide
Of human care and crime,
With whom the melodies abide
Of the everlasting chime;
Who carry music in their heart
Through dusky lane and wrangling mart
Plying their daily task with busier feet,
Because their secret souls a holy strain repeat."

KEBLE.

Early History of the Baptist—God's Hidden Ones—The Hill Country of
Judea—A Childless Home—The Forerunner Announced.

To the evangelist Luke we are indebted for details of those antecedent circumstances that ushered John the Baptist into the world. He tells us that he had "traced the course of all things accurately from the first." And in those final words, "from the first," he suggests that he had deliberately sought to examine into those striking events from which, as from a wide-spreading root, the great growth of Christianity had originated. Who of us has not sometimes followed the roots of some newly-discovered plant deep into the black mould, intent on pursuing them to their furthest extremity, and extricating them from the clinging earth without injuring one delicate radicle? So this good physician, accustomed by his training to accurate research and experiment, went back to scenes and events anterior to any which his brother Evangelists recorded. He compensated for the authority of an eye-witness by the thoroughness and care of his investigation.

What were the sources from which the third Evangelist drew his information? We cannot be sure, but may hazard a suggestion, which is supported by the archaic simplicity, the indescribable grace, the almost idyllic beauty of his two opening chapters. Critics have repeatedly drawn attention to their unique character, and insisted that they are due to some other hand than that which has given us the rest of the story of "the Son of Man." And why should we not attribute them to "the Mother" herself? It has been truly said that mothers are the natural historians of their children's early days—never tired of observing them, they never tire of recounting their prodigies; and, in an especial manner, Mary had kept all things, pondering in her heart those wonderful circumstances which had left so indelible an impression on her life. She who, in her over-welling joy, uttered "the Magnificat," was surely capable, even judging from a literary and human standpoint, of the language in which the story is told; and the facts themselves would only stand out the clearer in her closing years, as many another memory

faded from her mind. The granite remains when the floods have swept away the light soil that filled the interstices of the rocks.

It were a theme worthy of a great artist to depict! Mary's face, furrowed by deep lines of anguish, yet glowing with sacred fire and holy memory. Luke, sitting at his manuscript, now letting her tell her story without interruption, and again interpolating an inquiry, the words growing on the page; while, nearer than each to either, making no tremor in the hot summer air as He comes, casting no shadow in the brilliant eastern light—He of whom they speak and write steals in to stand beside them, bringing all things to their remembrance by the Holy Spirit's agency, even as He had told them.

The story of John the Baptist was so clearly part of that of Jesus, that Mary could hardly recall the one without the other. And, besides, Elisabeth, as the angel said, was her kinswoman—perhaps her cousin—to whom she naturally turned in the hour of her maidenly astonishment and rapture. Though much younger, Mary was united to her relative by a close and tender tie, and it was only natural that what had happened to Elisabeth should have impressed her almost as deeply as her own memorable experiences. So it is possible that from the lips of the mother of our Lord we obtain these details of the House of Zacharias.

I. THE QUIET IN THE LAND.—God has always had his hidden ones; and, while the world has been rent by faction and war, ravaged by fire and sword, and drenched with the blood of her sons, these have heard his call to enter their chamber, and shut themselves in until the storm had spent its fury. It was so during the days of Ahab, when the eye of omniscience beheld at least seven thousand who had not bowed the knee to Baal. It was so in the awful days of the Civil War, when Puritan and Royalist faced each other at Naseby and Marston Moor, and the land seemed swept in a blinding storm. Groups of ardent souls gathered to spend their time in worship and acts of mercy—like those at Little Gidding, in Huntingdonshire, under the direction of Mr. Nicholas Ferrar. It was so when the thirty years' war desolated Germany, and "the quiet in the land" withdrew themselves from the agitated scene of human affairs

to wait on God, embalming their hearts in hymns and poems which exhale a perfume as from crushed flowers.

It was eminently so in the days of which we write. Darkness covered the earth, and gross darkness the peoples. Herod's infamous cruelties, craft, and bloodshed were at their height. The country questioned with fear what new direction his crimes might take. The priesthood was obsequious to his whim; the bonds of society seemed dissolved. Theudas and Judas of Galilee, mentioned by Gamaliel, were but specimens of the bandit leaders who broke into revolt and harried the country districts for the maintenance of their followers. Greed, speculation, and lawless violence, had ample and undisputed opportunity to despoil the national glory and corrupt the heart of the national life.

Is it to be wondered that the godly remnant would meet in little groups and secluded hiding-places to comfort themselves in God? We are told, for instance, that Anna spake of the Babe, whom she had probably embraced in her aged trembling arms, "to all them that were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem" (Luke ii. 38, R.V.). What would we not give to know something more of the members of this sacred society, which preserved the loftiest traditions, and embodied in their lives some of the finest traits of the religion of their forefathers! The gloom of their times only led them more eagerly to con the predictions of their Hebrew prophets, and desire their accomplishment. Full often they would climb the heights and look out over the desert wastes to descry the advent of the Mighty One, coming from Edom, with his garments stained with the blood of Israel's foes. When they met, the burden of conversation, which flowed under vine or fig-tree, by the wayside or in humble homes, would be of their cherished hope. And as they beheld the hapless condition of their fatherland, the land of Abraham, the city of David, the cry must often have been extorted; "How long, O Lord, holy and true, will it be ere He shall come whose right it is who shall sit on the throne of his father David, and of whose kingdom there shall be no end? Come forth out of thy royal chambers, O Prince of all the kings of the earth! Put on the visible robes of thy imperial majesty; take up that unlimited sceptre which thy Almighty Father hath bequeathed Thee; for now the voice of thy bride

calls Thee, and all creatures sigh to be renewed." So our great Milton prayed in more recent days.

We are not drawing on our imagination in describing these true-hearted watchers for the rising of the Day-star. They are fully indicated in the Gospel story. There was Simeon, righteous and devout, unto whom it had been revealed by the Holy Spirit that he should not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ; and Anna, the prophetess, who departed not from the temple, worshipping with fastings and supplications night and day; and the guileless Nathanael, an Israelite indeed, who had perhaps already commenced to sit at the foot of the ladder which bound his fig-tree to the highest heaven; and the peasant maiden Mary, the descendant of a noble house, though with fallen fortunes, who, like some vestal virgin, clad in snowy white, watched through the dark hours beside the flickering flame; and last, but not least, Zacharias and his wife Elisabeth, "who were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless."

For us, too, the times are dark. It is as though the shadows were being thrown far across the fields, and the light were becoming dim. Let the children of God draw together, to encourage each other in their holy faith, and to speak of their great hopes; for He who appeared once to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself shall appear a second time without sin unto salvation. We are, as the French version puts it, *burgesses of the skies*, "whence we wait for a Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ, who shall fashion anew the body of our humiliation, that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, according to the working whereby He is able even to subject all things unto Himself."

But this attitude of spirit, which dwells in the unseen and eternal, which counts on the indwelling of the Son of God by faith, and which ponders deeply over the sins and sorrows of the world around, is the temper of mind out of which the greatest deeds are wrought for the cause of God on the earth. The Marys who sit at Christ's feet arise to anoint Him for his burying. Take, for instance, the Moravian Church, born and cradled amid the pietism of which Spener of Berlin and Franke of Halle were the acknowledged leaders; and it has given to the world a far larger number of missionar-

ies in proportion to its membership than any church of the age. Or take the followers of George Fox, who have maintained through unparalleled suffering their testimony for spirituality of worship; and it is undeniable that some of the greatest reforms which have characterised the century recently closed have found their foremost advocates and apologists from their somewhat meagre ranks. Those who wait on God renew their strength. The world ignores them, scorning to reckon their tears and toils amid its renovating energies; but they refuse to abate their endeavours and sacrifices on its behalf. They repay its neglect by more assiduous exertions, its ingratitude by more exhausting sacrifices; content if, from out their ranks, there presently steps one who, like John the Baptist, opens a new chapter in the history of the race, and accelerates the advent of the Christ.

II. THE PARENTAGE OF THE FORERUNNER. — As the traveller emerges from the dreary wilderness that lies between Sinai and the southern frontier of Palestine—a scorching desert, in which Elijah was glad to find shelter from the sword-like rays in the shade of the retem shrub—he sees before him a long line of hills, which is the beginning of "the hill country of Judaea" (Luke i. 39). In contrast with the sand wastes which he has traversed, the valleys seem to laugh and sing. Greener and yet greener grow the pasture lands, till he can understand how Nabal and other sheep-masters were able to find maintenance for vast flocks of sheep. Here and there are the crumbled ruins which mark the site of ancient towns and villages tenanted now by the jackal or the wandering Arab. Amongst these, a modern traveller has identified the site of Juttah, the village home of the priest Zacharias and his wife Elisabeth.

To judge by their names, we may infer that their parents years before had been godly people. *Zacharias* meant *God's remembrance*; as though he were to be a perpetual reminder to his fellows of what God had promised, and to God of what they were expecting from his hand. *Elisabeth* meant *God's oath*; as though her people were perpetually appealing to those covenant promises in which, since He could swear by no greater, God had sworn by Himself, that He would never leave nor forsake, and that when the sceptre departed

from Judah and the law-giver from between his feet, Shiloh should come.

Zacharias was a priest, "of the course of Abijah," and twice a year he journeyed to Jerusalem to fulfil his office, for a week of six days and two Sabbaths. There were, Josephus tells us, somewhat more than 20,000 priests settled in Judaea at this time; and very many of them were like those whom Malachi denounced as degrading and depreciating the Temple services. The general character of the priesthood was deeply tainted by the corruption of the times, and as a class they were blind leaders of the blind. Not a few, however, were evidently deeply religious men, for we find that "a great number of the priests," after the crucifixion, believed on Christ and joined his followers. In this class we must therefore place Zacharias, who, with his wife, herself of the daughters of Aaron, is described as being "righteous before God."

The phrases are evidently selected with care. Many are righteous before men; but they were righteous *before God*. Their daily life and walk were regulated by a careful observance of the ordinances of the ceremonial and the commandments of the moral law. It is evident, from the apt and plentiful quotations from Scripture with which the song of Zacharias is replete, that the Scriptures were deeply pondered and revered in that highland home; and we have the angel's testimony to the prayers that ascended day and night. In all these things they were blameless—not faultless, as judged by God's infinite standard of rectitude, but blameless—because they lived up to the fullest limit of their knowledge of the will of God. They were blameless and harmless, the children of God, without blemish, in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom they were seen as lights in the world, holding forth amid neighbours and friends the Word of Truth.

But they lived under the shadow of a great sorrow. "They had no child, because Elisabeth was barren, and they both were now well stricken in years." When the good priest put off his official dress of white linen, and returned to his mountain home, there was no childish voice to welcome him. It seemed almost certain that their family would soon die out and be forgotten; that no child would close their eyes in death; and that by no link whatsoever could they be con-