

Chapter 8

The Preaching of John the Baptist

Matthew 3 vv 1-6

Mark 1 vv 1-8

Luke 1 vv 1-18

When our Queen goes on a journey, her smart car comes to the palace. Our Queen steps in, the door is closed and the car drives off. Sometimes a few police motor-cyclists ride a little in front and a little way behind the limousine. That is both for protection and as a sign of honour.

To prepare the route? Oh no, I can see you smiling at the thought. That is not necessary. The roads are in good condition. Throughout our whole land is a network of well made-up roads. Some are paved with cobbles, some are asphalted, and yes nowadays many are made of concrete.

But in the land of Canaan, yes, everywhere in the East, there were in those days no such fine roads. Cobbled, asphalt and concrete roads did not yet exist. Roads were not yet paved. After a lot of rain there were often deep holes in them where the earth had been washed away. If such a road ran alongside the mountains, then sometimes large stones rolled down those mountains and lay in the middle of the road. If the road wound through a wood, then especially after a storm, trees were frequently blown down and lay right across the route obstructing progress.

You can well understand that in those days travelling was dangerous. There were then, of course, no cars, but kings and princes rode in chariots. So, in those early times, someone always

travelled a good way in front of the royal conveyance. He had to prepare the road.

If a deep hole had appeared somewhere, then the outrider filled it up so that the king's chariot should not be jolted. If great stones lay on the road then the man rolled them to one side so that the royal carriage should not strike them and cause a possible accident. If an uprooted tree obstructed progress then the outrider cleared it away. If he could not manage this alone, then the people in that district were made to help. The work of the outrider (or herald) then, was to make clear and smooth the road which the king would use.

But the herald had to do something else too. He had to announce to the people that the king was approaching. Then they could look out for him and cheer their sovereign as he rode past.

No, the herald did not point to himself, but he pointed behind him.

The inhabitants did not have to look at him, but they had to gaze down the road, full of expectation, looking out for the approach of the king. The people had to forget the herald and wait for the king. Not the herald, but the king was the important personage.

Such a man was called in Eastern lands a FORERUNNER.

The Lord Jesus, the King of kings, had been born in Bethlehem's cattle shed. Hardly

THE BIBLE HISTORY TOLD TO OUR CHILDREN

- NEW TESTAMENT -

anyone in the land of the Jews knew this. The Jews did indeed expect a king, they looked out for the Messiah. But he would, according to them, set up an EARTHLY kingdom. He would drive the Romans out of the land. He would become king over the Jewish people, Then they would once more live in peace and prosperity, as in the days of David. Thus the Jewish people thought about the Messiah, thus had they been taught by the scribes and Pharisees. It was, however, not so. No, the Lord Jesus would not set up an earthly kingdom, but an HEAVENLY. The Lord Jesus would not fight against the Romans, but He would do battle with the devil. The head of Satan would be bruised by this King. He would come to save sinners. He would be the Saviour, the Redeemer of all His elect people.

Now you can well understand why this King was not expected. No, for the Saviour there was no room, for the Jews looked and longed for an earthly king.

But now, God in His goodness, was sending a forerunner, a herald, to make known the coming of that King.

Naturally this forerunner did not have to prepare the roads in the land of Canaan, but he had to prepare a way in the hearts of the Jewish people. He had to tell them that they were great sinners lying under the curse of God, and that they deserved to be thrust into eternal misery. He must show them their enormous guilt. He must let them know that they had, by their sins, angered God, and were still doing so daily. Oh, the Jewish people must feel, and become convinced, that they were lost in trespasses and sins and that they would be punished by a holy and righteous God, who was deeply insulted by them.

But the forerunner had also to point to the King, who was now coming. He had to let them know that that King could save them from their punishment. There was but one possibility of being freed from the wrath to come, and that was - believe in the Son of God as the Saviour of lost sinners.

So that, boys and girls, would be the work of the forerunner of the Lord Jesus. In the first place he had to make known to them their guilt, and in the second place he had to point out the King who could save them from eternal ruin. The Jews would have to feel the need of a Saviour.

That thought of an earthly kingdom must be done away from the hearts of the Jews. To them must be preached that they had to be saved, not from the Romans, but from a much more dangerous enemy. They must be saved from the devil, and from the slavery of sin.

That is why God sent a forerunner, whose task was to announce the coming of the Saviour. Can you see that a way had to be prepared in the hearts?

Come, in our thoughts, we will just go to the Jordan. We are very close to the place where the Israelites, under the leadership of Joshua, entered into the land of Canaan. What a long time ago that is, isn't it? Yet there in Gilgal still stood the memorial of the twelve stones.

When at last we arrive at the Jordan, we find that we are not alone. A large crowd of people stands closely grouped together around one man. All is quiet. Everyone listens with great attention to his words. Listen, he speaks clearly and plainly: "Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

Do you hear that? He talks about the

THE BIBLE HISTORY TOLD TO OUR CHILDREN

- NEW TESTAMENT -

kingdom of heaven, not about the earthly kingdom, which they were expecting. He pauses and gives the many listeners a moment to consider his words, but he soon continues "He comes, He comes after me!" Who is coming then? ... The King, - the Saviour.

This preacher is the forerunner, the "preparer of the way" of the Lord Jesus. How strange he appears. How simply he is dressed. He wears merely a cloak made of camel's hair. He has a belt or girdle of leather. This was how the prophet Elijah also dressed, centuries before. He looks a bit like Elijah.

But who is this forerunner then? You know already don't you? It is John, the son of Zacharias and Elizabeth.

It is now thirty years ago since a little boy was born in the house of Zacharias, who was called by his parents "John". That child is now grown up. Now he is a full grown man of thirty. We know nothing of the youth of John, nothing at all.

Evidently, after the death of his father and mother, he moved into the desert. He sought solitude, far from the bustle of mankind. It was a desolate, lonely region. What he did there we do not know, but we may well believe, that he prayed much. Neither do we know how long he was in the desert. Possibly for years. In God's Word we read only that he ate locusts and wild honey.

In the land of Canaan people often ate locusts. They were first cleaned and then roasted. Just as we eat shrimps, so in Eastern lands, they eat locusts.

Also in those lands were many swarms of wild bees, which gathered honey in a hollow tree or in crevices of the rocks. You remember how Samson found honey in the carcass of the lion?

Well now, there in the desert there were also some of these wild bees, and John ate daily some of their honey. That was his food, nothing else. So you can see that he lived very simply there.

When he was thirty years old, the Lord commanded him to go and preach. He too then, waited for the call of the Lord.

Suddenly he appeared near Jordan and preached. He pointed out to the people their sins and told them that they must repent. Yes, John baptised too. That is why he became known as "John the Baptist".

The news spread across the countryside like wildfire that a new prophet had arisen. This made the Jews sit up and take notice. A new prophet? The last prophet had been Malachi, but he had been dead more than four hundred years. So it is no wonder that many Jews travelled to Jordan to hear John. They are very curious to know what this wonderful prophet has to say.

From every part of the country they converge on the Jordan. So that is why we find such a large multitude gathered round John. And what message do they hear there? I have already told you. "Repent ye!" There, they hear that they must forsake sin. There, is preached to them that the King is coming.

And do the Jews listen to the forerunner? Do the solemn words of John the Baptist make any impression? Oh, with many of them, no. They listen, but their hearts remain the same, but there are some among them who bow the head and think seriously about those things which John preaches in the name of the Lord. The Lord blesses the preaching to their souls.

When John tells them that they are sinners, who daily by their sins are offending God, then they bow their heads lower, and



The preaching of

confess that it is true. These people do not sneer, they feel that what John says to them is true. They step forward and confess their sins. They acknowledge that it would be just if God punished them everlastingly. Oh, they deserve nothing less than hell. In their hearts arises sorrow for sin.

Then they are baptised by John. With John they go down into the water and John then immerses them momentarily beneath the surface. Among us children are not immersed, no, the minister only sprinkles a few drops on the forehead of the little ones. But it means the same thing. Both complete immersion and sprinkling show us that, as our bodies are cleansed by the water so our sinful souls must be cleansed by the blood of the Lord Jesus.

When, convinced of sin, they acknowledged that they deserved eternal death, John pointed out to them the Saviour, who would shortly come. In the hearts of those people room was made for the Redeemer. They needed the Lord Jesus.

So, in this way, boys and girls, John prepared the way for the Lord Jesus in the hearts of those convinced sinners. They looked out longingly for the great King, who could save them from eternal ruin.

Every day the solemn call sounds out on the banks of the Jordan "Repent ye". John doesn't



John the Baptist

become tired of repeating it again and again.

All sorts of people come to him. Rich and poor, young and old. Respectable citizens of Jerusalem and also publicans. Soldiers, and poor fishermen from the Northern parts of the country.

For all these people, however, he has the same message. "Repent ye", and "He that cometh after me is mightier than I." No, John does not take any honour to himself, he intends the honour of the King. They are to forget John and look for the Lord Jesus. In truth, just as a forerunner went before the chariot of an earthly prince, so John carried out that work for his heavenly King.

Matthew 3 vv 7-12

Suddenly the crowd which encircles John moves respectfully to one side. They make room. For whom? — Just look.

Very solemnly and with great dignity, many Pharisees and Sadducees draw near. Can you still remember what they were? If not, just read Chapter 2 again. That will tell you.

The many listeners bow low before these Pharisees and Sadducees, for the people respect these pious, eminent men.

John, however, has no respect for them. With a serious look on his face he sees these men

THE BIBLE HISTORY TOLD TO OUR CHILDREN

- NEW TESTAMENT -

approach. For them too, the forerunner has a message. What message? — Just listen!

"O generation of vipers, who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" But — But, surely that is not polite of John, is it? Instead of a friendly reception; instead of bowing low before them also, he calls them "Vipers"!

Why should he do that? Those Pharisees and Sadducees did not come to him out of respect for his preaching, but they came with an evil heart. They were so holy, so pious, that they had no need of a Saviour. They could earn heaven by themselves. Moreover they had misled the people. It was because of them that the people expected an earthly king, for they had taught the Jewish people so. They had deceived the people. The prophet Isaiah and the other prophets had however foretold it differently.

That is why John greets them with those harsh words. His soul is outraged by such great wickedness and hypocrisy. It is just as though he says "You think that you do not need the Lord Jesus, but you are mistaken. You will be lost, and the wrath of God will come upon you."

He tells those eminent Pharisees and Sadducees too that they must repent. They too must become convinced of sin and its punishment.

An angry look comes into the faces of those distinguished Jews. They do not believe the preaching of John. Believe? — You can well understand they become furious. Their eyes blaze. How dare he!

But John then warns them to hear more. If a fruit tree stands in a garden but never bears any fruit, then the gardener will eventually cut down that unfruitful tree and burn it. Away with it! To do this he will take an axe and lay it to the

roots of that tree. It is only an example, but John means them to understand this by it. "Thus will God cut you down also, if you refuse to listen. Shortly death will come for you too, Pharisees and Sadducees, but then it will be too late for you. When the King comes, listen to Him. Ask Him to save you from ruin."

What a solemn sermon, isn't it? John was a faithful preacher. He spared none. Rich and poor, all were the same to him.

You too, however, are also warned, boys and girls. Every Sunday you hear in church the same call "Repent ye". And that we cannot do. No, that is true, and yet God requires it of us. Why? It is just in this way we come to be in need. In your hearts too must a way be prepared for the Lord Jesus. Now it is no longer preached that the King shall come, the preaching tells us that He is come. But what good is it to us, if He comes not into our hearts. None at all! Then, in spite of a preached Jesus, we still go to ruin. He must not only be THE Saviour, but He must become OUR Saviour.

Plead that God himself will make room in your hearts. Room for Him!

And if we will not listen? If we don't care? Well then, for us too the axe is already laid to the roots. Then, for us too, death will come, when we least expect it. And then it is too late!

The preaching of John is a solemn warning for us also.

ⁱ The author was a minister in the Dutch Reformed churches, which are paedobaptists.