

A Shining Light

***“The path of the
just is as the
shining light, that
shineth more and
more unto the
perfect day.”***

—Proverbs 4:18

WHEN JOHN THE BAPTIST began his ministry, there was a question in the minds of many of the devout Jews as to whether or not he might be the promised Messiah. Luke 3:15 reads, “The people were in expectation, and all men mused in their hearts of John, whether he were the Christ, or not.” John answered, saying that there was one coming who was “mightier” than he, one whose shoe latches he was “not worthy to unloose.”—Mark 1:7; Luke 3:16

This ‘mightier’ one was the Messiah. Doubtless, many in Israel at that time knew of the unusual circumstances associated with the birth of John the Baptist. Not so many would know of the miraculous birth of Jesus, who was six months younger than John. (Luke 1:13-26) Even so, there was an air of expectancy in the land. This may have been due to a partial understanding of Daniel’s prophecy concerning the “seven weeks, and threescore and two weeks” “unto the Messiah the Prince.”—Dan. 9:25

John the Baptist realized that he was not the Messiah, but he discerned that Jesus was. In an announcement concerning him, John said, "Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world. This is he of whom I said, After me cometh a man which is preferred before me: for he was before me. And I knew him not: but that he should be made manifest to Israel."—John 1:29-31

While there seemed to be no doubt in John's mind concerning the true identity of Jesus, later we find him wondering. He had been cast into prison, and, hearing of "the works of Christ, he sent two of his disciples, And said unto him, Art thou he that should come, or do we look for another?" Jesus' reply was, "Go and shew John again those things which ye do hear and see: The blind receive their sight, and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the poor have the gospel preached to them."—Matt. 11:2-5

We can understand John's concern over this question which was so vitally important to him. Having believed that Jesus was the Messiah, he expected him to set up the Messianic kingdom in Israel, and, through his authority and power, deliver the Israelites from their Roman taskmasters. Instead of this, he found himself in prison; and while he had heard of the miracles being performed, he perhaps wondered why a loyal friend of the Messiah, and a relative, should be permitted to languish in prison with no effort being made toward his release. Was one who was able to raise the dead, powerless to intervene on his behalf?

The answer Jesus sent to John's question should have been very reassuring, although the record does

not say whether or not John was convinced by it. The Old Testament prophets had foretold that the Messiah would do all the things that Jesus was doing, including the raising of the dead. When Messiah's kingdom is established, these miracles of healing and life-giving will be worldwide. But the fact that Jesus was able to perform such miracles on a local basis, and while still in the flesh, should have been proof enough that he actually was the Messiah.

Not long after this, John the Baptist was beheaded. Even if his faith in Jesus as the Messiah had been restored, it seems evident he did not understand clearly just why his kingdom was not being established more quickly. If John had continued to live until Jesus was crucified, his bewilderment would have been even greater.

NO "OUTWARD SHOW"

Jesus' disciples did not grasp the situation any more clearly than John. On one occasion, they heard the Pharisees ask Jesus "when the kingdom of God should come." His reply to this question was, "The kingdom of God cometh not with outward show. Neither shall they say, Lo here! Or, lo there! for, behold, the kingdom of God is among you."—Luke 17:20,21, *Marginal Translation*

The kingdom of God was 'among' the people of Israel at that time in the sense that the king was in their midst. Certainly the Pharisees did not realize this, and the disciples only vaguely comprehended the meaning of the events taking place around them. They did believe, however, that Jesus was the Messiah, and doubtless wondered why he did not do more about establishing his kingdom.

On another occasion, Jesus said that he would give his flesh “for the life of the world,” but his disciples did not understand from this that their Master expected to die a sacrificial death and thus redeem the world from sin and death. (John 6:51) They thought only of the powerful government which the Old Testament prophets foretold the Messiah would establish.—Isa. 9:6,7

The disciples knew that Jesus had enemies—enemies who would not hesitate to put him to death if they had the opportunity to do so. His enemies were located mostly in Judea, and particularly around Jerusalem. Jesus realized this, and for some time had conducted his ministry in the northern province of Galilee. However, when Lazarus died, he announced his intention of returning to Bethany, which was near Jerusalem. The disciples were perplexed by this. Thomas said to them, “Let us also go, that we may die with him.”—John 11:16

Matthew 16:21,22, reads, “From that time forth began Jesus to shew unto his disciples, how that he must go unto Jerusalem, and suffer many things of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised again the third day. Then Peter took him, and began to rebuke him, saying, Be it far from thee, Lord: this shall not be unto thee.”

While Jesus thus plainly told his disciples that he expected to be put to death, they could not find it in their hearts to believe it. How could this be if he were the one who had come to establish a kingdom? While they had confidence in what Jesus said, they seemed to hope that in this matter he was overly concerned, and that what he predicted would not come true.

Jesus emphasized that it would be in Jerusalem that he would be apprehended by his enemies, so we read, "Because he [Jesus] was nigh to Jerusalem, and because they thought that the kingdom of God should immediately appear. He said therefore, A certain nobleman went into a far country to receive for himself a kingdom, and to return."—Luke 19:11,12

From this parable the disciples evidently gathered the thought that Jesus, whom they correctly believed to be the Messiah, was going away and that it would not be until he returned that he would establish the long-promised kingdom—that government of peace which was to extend its sphere of influence worldwide. They knew not where the 'far country' was to which Jesus indicated in the parable he was going. They seemed not to be particularly concerned with this. What they did want to know was when he would return, and what signs there would be to indicate the fact that he was again present.

Just a few days before Jesus was crucified, we find him on the "mount of Olives" with his disciples and they are questioning him. "Tell us," they said, "when shall these things be? and what shall be the sign of thy coming, and of the end of the world?" (Matt. 24:3) Just before asking these questions Jesus had told his disciples that the beautiful Temple at Jerusalem was to be destroyed, that there would not be one stone left upon another. (Matt. 24:1,2) It was evidently, in part at least, to this prophecy that the disciples referred in their question, 'When shall these things be?'

They were interested in more than this. They remembered the parable in which Jesus pictured himself as a 'certain nobleman' going away into a far country and returning to establish a kingdom. They were concerned about this, for had not Jesus promised that they would share with him in the glory of that kingdom? How long must they wait for this exaltation, and how would they know when the time of waiting was ended?

The *King James* translation does not bring out the real import of the disciples' questions concerning these important matters. A translation more true to the Greek text would be, "What shall be the sign of thy presence, and of the end of the age?" It is the Greek word *parousia* which, in the *King James Version*, is mistranslated 'coming'; and the Greek word *aion* is mistranslated 'world.' The disciples did not ask him for signs which would indicate that the coming of Christ was near. They wanted to know how they would be able to discern the fact of his Second Presence, and that the 'age' of waiting for his return had ended.

It was natural for the disciples to ask for signs of the Master's Second Presence, for it was only by means of signs that they recognized that the Messiah was then in their midst. There was nothing in the prophecies to describe the appearance of the Messiah—the contour of his face, the color of his hair, or his height. Jesus had ministered throughout Israel for more than three years. He had healed the sick and raised the dead, but practically the entire nation was blind to the fact that he was the Messiah.

The disciples were favored in being able to recognize him as the Messiah, and this was because

they saw, and correctly interpreted, the signs which accompanied his ministry. When Jesus would reassure John the Baptist, he simply called attention to some of these signs. So now, the disciples reasoned, if Jesus was going away and returning later, they again wanted to be among the favored ones who would discern the fact of his presence. Since signs had revealed his First Presence to them, they reasoned, and correctly so, that his Second Presence would also be revealed by signs, hence their question, 'What shall be the sign of thy presence, and of the end of the age?'

JESUS' REPLY

Jesus did not tell the disciples that their question was out of order, that when he returned he would be suspended in the sky where everybody could see him, hence that signs would not be needed to reveal the fact of his return. Instead, Jesus acknowledged the appropriateness of the disciples' questions by the fact that he gave them a long list of 'signs' by which the fact of his Second Presence would be revealed to his people. In other ways, too, Jesus' answer to the question, What shall be the sign of thy presence, and of the end of the age? showed its pertinence to the subject in hand.

Naturally, the disciples were also interested in the time of their Lord's return. This event was doubtless included in their question concerning when these things would take place. In his humility, Jesus acknowledged that he did not then know the time of his return. "Of that day and hour knoweth no man," Jesus said, "no, not the angels

of heaven, but my Father only.” (Matt. 24:36) After Jesus was raised from the dead, and when he appeared to his disciples for the last time, he said, “It is not for you to know the times or the seasons, which the Father hath put in his own power.”—Acts 1:7

Many students of prophecy are in the habit of reading more into these statements by Jesus than he intended. He did not say that he would never know the time of his return. He merely said that he did not then know. Nor did his statement that the ‘times’ and the ‘seasons’ of the Divine plan were in the hands of his Father imply that the Father, in his own due time and way, would not reveal some of the time features of his plan to his faithful people.—I Thess. 5:1

In humbly confessing that he did not then know the time of his return, so could not answer this part of the disciples’ question, he prepared their minds for a basically important truth, which all the Lord’s people should know. He said, “Watch therefore: for ye know not what hour your Lord doth come.” (Matt. 24:42) This indicates clearly that the time of our Lord’s return would not be known in advance. But even more important, it suggests that only those who watched would know that he had returned.

In order to grasp this thought with clarity, it is essential to realize that Christ does not come as a man at his Second Advent. He sacrificed his humanity for the sins of the world. Or, in fulfillment of Jesus’ own statement, he gave his “flesh” for the life of the world. (John 6:51) Jesus was not raised from the dead as a man, but as a glorious Divine

being. He was present with his disciples for forty days before he returned to heaven; but they saw him only on a few brief occasions, and then it was necessary for him to miraculously appear to them else they could not have seen him at all.

Since his resurrection, Jesus is the “express image” of his Heavenly Father, the “invisible God,” “whom no man hath seen, nor can see.” (Heb. 1:3; Col. 1:15; I Tim. 1:17; 6:16) The existence of God is recognized, not by our ability to see him with the natural eye, but because we discern the signs which prove that he “is, and . . . is the rewarder of them that diligently seek him.” (Heb. 11:6) Just so, it is only by means of the signs which were to accompany the return of Jesus, that we are able to discern the fact of his Second Presence. This is why Jesus admonished his disciples to watch.

“Of that day and that hour knoweth no man, no, not the angels which are in heaven, neither the Son, but the Father. Take ye heed, watch and pray: for ye know not when the time is. For the Son of man is as a man taking a far journey, who left his house, and gave authority to his servants, and to every man his work, and commanded the porter to watch. Watch ye therefore: for ye know not when the master of the house cometh, at even, or at midnight, or at the cockcrowing, or in the morning: Lest coming suddenly he find you sleeping. And what I say unto you I say unto all, Watch.”—Mark 13:32-37

Let us take heed, therefore, to the increased light of our Lord’s presence now in the closing years of the Gospel Age. ■