

SUGGESTED FURTHER READING: Hebrews 12:4-13

What high testimony is borne in this passage to the character of Zacharias and Elisabeth! It matters little whether we interpret this 'righteousness' as that which is imputed to all believers for their justification, or that which is wrought inwardly in believers by the operation of the Holy Spirit for their sanctification. The two sorts of righteousness are never disjoined. There are none justified who are not sanctified, and there are none sanctified who are not justified. Suffice it for us to know that Zacharias and Elisabeth had grace when grace was very rare, and kept all the burdensome observances of the ceremonial law with devout conscientiousness when few Israelites cared for them except in name and form.

The main thing that concerns us all is the example which this holy pair hold up to Christians. Let us all strive to serve God faithfully and live fully up to our light, even as they did.

It was a heavy trial that God was pleased to lay on Zacharias and Elisabeth (v. 7). The full force of these words can hardly be understood by a modern Christian. To an ancient Jew they would convey the idea of a very weighty affliction. To be childless was one of the bitterest of sorrows (1 Sam. 1:10).

The grace of God exempts no one from trouble. Let us remember this, if we serve Christ, and let us count trial no strange thing. Let us believe that a hand of perfect wisdom is measuring out all our portion, and that when God chastises us, it is to make us 'partakers of his holiness' (Heb. 12:10). If afflictions drive us nearer to Christ, the Bible and prayer, they are positive blessings. We may not think so now. But we shall think so when we wake up in another world.

FOR MEDITATION: God works out our circumstances, for our good if we love him (Rom. 8:28). He knows what might have been if our circumstances were other than they are (Ps. 81:13-15; Matt. 11:21-23). Can we not trust his wisdom to have worked out the best circumstances for us in every situation?

SUGGESTED FURTHER READING: Colossians 1:15-18

The Gospel of St John, which begins with these verses, is in many respects very unlike the other three Gospels. But it is enough to remember that Matthew, Mark, Luke and John wrote under the direct inspiration of God. In the general plan of their respective Gospels and in the particular details, in everything that they record and in everything that they do not record, they were all four equally and entirely guided by the Holy Ghost.

About the matters which St John was specially inspired to relate in his Gospel one general remark will suffice. The things which are peculiar to his Gospel are among the most precious possessions of the church of Christ. No one of the four Gospel writers has given us such full statements about the divinity of Christ, about justification by faith, about the offices of Christ, about the work of the Holy Ghost and about the privileges of believers as we read in the pages of St John.

The five verses now before us contain a statement of matchless sublimity concerning the divine nature of our Lord Jesus Christ. He it is, beyond all question, whom St John means when he speaks of 'the Word'. No doubt there are heights and depths in that statement which are far beyond man's understanding. And yet there are plain lessons in it which every Christian would do well to treasure up in his mind.

Our Lord Jesus Christ is eternal. St John tells us that 'In the beginning was the Word.' He did not begin to exist when the heavens and the earth were made. Much less did he begin to exist when the gospel was brought into the world. He had glory with the Father 'before the world was' (John 17:5). He was existing when matter was first created and before time began. He was 'before all things' (Col. 1:17). He was from all eternity.

FOR MEDITATION: Our Lord is the great unifying theme of all Scripture because he is not a word to us among many, but the Word.

SUGGESTED FURTHER READING: Psalm 111

God announced the coming birth of John the Baptist by an angel (v. 11). The ministry of angels is undoubtedly a deep subject. At no time do we read of so many appearances of angels as about the time of our Lord's incarnation and entrance into the world. The meaning of this circumstance is sufficiently clear. It was meant to teach the church that Messiah was no angel, but the Lord of angels, as well as of men.

One thing about angels we must never forget. They take a deep interest in the work of Christ and the salvation that Christ has provided. They sang high praise when the Son of God came down to make peace by his own blood between God and man. They rejoice when sinners repent. They delight to minister to those who shall be heirs of salvation. Let us strive to be like them, while we are on earth—to be of their mind, and to share their joys.

The appearance of an angel produced a marked effect on the mind of Zacharias (v. 12). The experience of this righteous man tallies exactly with that of other saints who saw visions of things belonging to another world (Exod. 3:6; Dan. 10:7-9; Matt. 28:8; Rev. 1: 17). They trembled and were afraid.

How are we to account for this fear? It arises from our inward sense of weakness, guilt and corruption. The vision of an inhabitant of heaven reminds us forcibly of our own imperfection and of our natural unfitness to stand before God. If angels are so great and terrible, what must the Lord of angels be?

Let us bless God that we have a mighty Mediator between God and man, the man Christ Jesus. Believing on him, we may draw near to God with boldness and look forward to the Day of Judgement without fear. But let us tremble when we think of the terror of the wicked at the last day.

FOR MEDITATION: Our modern world is a testimony to the wisdom and knowledge of men who have thrown off the fear of God (Rom. 3:18). But where God is not feared there is no true wisdom and knowledge (Ps. 111:10; Prov. 1:7).