

DA - The Desire of Ages (1898)

Chap. 22 - Imprisonment and Death of John

John the Baptist had been first in heralding Christ's kingdom, and he was first also in suffering. From the free air of the wilderness and the vast throngs that had hung upon his words, he was now shut in by the walls of a dungeon cell. He had become a prisoner in the fortress of Herod Antipas. In the territory east of Jordan, which was under the dominion of Antipas, much of John's ministry had been spent. Herod himself had listened to the preaching of the Baptist. The dissolute king had trembled under the call to repentance. "Herod feared John, knowing that he was a just man and an holy; . . . and when he heard him, he did many things, and heard him gladly." John dealt with him faithfully, denouncing his iniquitous alliance with Herodias, his brother's wife. For a time Herod feebly sought to break the chain of lust that bound him; but Herodias fastened him the more firmly in her toils, and found revenge upon the Baptist by inducing Herod to cast him into prison. {DA 214.1}

The life of John had been one of active labor, and the gloom and inaction of his prison life weighed heavily upon him. As week after week passed, bringing no change, despondency and doubt crept over him. His disciples did not forsake him. They were allowed access to the prison, and they brought him tidings of the works of Jesus, and told how the people were flocking to Him. But they questioned why, if this new teacher was the Messiah, He did nothing to effect John's release. How could He permit His faithful herald to be deprived of liberty and perhaps of life? {DA 214.2}

These questions were not without effect. Doubts which otherwise would never have arisen were suggested to John. Satan rejoiced to hear the words of these disciples, and to see how they bruised the soul of the Lord's messenger. Oh, how often those who think themselves the friends of a good man, and who are eager to show their fidelity to him, prove to be his most dangerous enemies! How often, instead of strengthening his faith, their words depress and dishearten! {DA 215.1}

Like the Saviour's disciples, John the Baptist did not understand the nature of Christ's kingdom. He expected Jesus to take the throne of David; and as time passed, and the Saviour made no claim to kingly authority, John became perplexed and troubled. He had declared to the people that in order for the way to be prepared before the Lord, the prophecy of Isaiah must be fulfilled; the mountains and hills must be brought low, the crooked made straight, and the rough places plain. He had looked for the high places of human pride and power to be cast down. He had pointed to the Messiah as the One whose fan was in His hand, and who would thoroughly purge His floor, who would gather the wheat into His garner, and burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire. Like the prophet Elijah, in whose spirit and power he had come to Israel, he looked for the Lord to reveal Himself as a God that answereth by fire. {DA 215.2}

In his mission the Baptist had stood as a fearless reprovor of iniquity, both in high places and in low. He had dared to face King Herod with the plain rebuke of sin. He had not counted his life dear unto himself, that he might fulfill his appointed work. And now from his dungeon he watched for the Lion of the tribe of Judah to cast down the pride of the oppressor, and to deliver the poor and him that cried. But Jesus seemed to content Himself with gathering disciples about Him, and healing and teaching the people. He was eating at the tables of the publicans, while every day the Roman yoke rested more heavily upon Israel, while King Herod and his vile paramour worked their will, and the cries of the poor and suffering went up to heaven. {DA 215.3}

To the desert prophet all this seemed a mystery beyond his fathoming. There were hours when the whisperings of demons tortured his spirit, and the shadow of a terrible fear crept over him. Could it be that the long-hoped-for Deliverer had not yet appeared? Then what meant the message that he himself had been impelled to bear? John had been bitterly disappointed in the result of his mission. He had expected that the message from God would have the same effect as when the law was read in the days of Josiah and of Ezra (2 Chronicles 34; Nehemiah 8, 9); that there would follow a deep-seated work of repentance and returning unto the Lord. For the success of this mission his whole life had been sacrificed. Had it been in vain? {DA 216.1}

John was troubled to see that through love for him, his own disciples were cherishing unbelief in regard to Jesus. Had his work for them been fruitless? Had he been unfaithful in his mission, that he was now cut off from labor? If the promised Deliverer had appeared, and John had been found true to his calling, would not Jesus now overthrow the oppressor's power, and set free His herald? {DA 216.2}

But the Baptist did not surrender his faith in Christ. The memory of the voice from heaven and the descending dove, the spotless purity of Jesus, the power of the Holy Spirit that had rested upon John as he came into the Saviour's presence, and the testimony of the prophetic scriptures,--all witnessed that Jesus of Nazareth was the Promised One. {DA 216.3}

John would not discuss his doubts and anxieties with his companions. He determined to send a message of inquiry to Jesus. This he entrusted to two of his disciples, hoping that an interview with the Saviour would confirm their faith, and bring assurance to their brethren. And he longed for some word from Christ spoken directly for himself. {DA 216.4}

The disciples came to Jesus with their message, "Art Thou He that should come, or do we look for another?" {DA 216.5}

How short the time since the Baptist had pointed to Jesus, and proclaimed, "Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world." "He it is, who coming after me is preferred before me." John 1:29, 27. And now the question, "Art Thou He that should come?" It was keenly bitter and disappointing to human nature. If John, the faithful forerunner, failed to discern Christ's mission, what could be expected from the self-seeking multitude? {DA 216.6}

The Saviour did not at once answer the disciples' question. As they stood wondering at His silence, the sick and afflicted were coming to Him to be healed. The blind were groping their way through the crowd; diseased ones of all classes, some urging their own way, some borne by their friends, were eagerly pressing into the presence of Jesus. The voice of the mighty Healer penetrated the deaf ear. A word, a touch of His hand, opened the blind eyes to behold the light of day, the scenes of nature, the faces of friends, and the face of the Deliverer. Jesus rebuked disease and banished fever. His voice reached the ears of the dying, and they arose in health and vigor. Paralyzed demoniacs obeyed His word, their madness left them, and they worshiped Him. While He healed their diseases, He taught the people. The poor peasants and laborers, who were shunned by the rabbis as unclean, gathered close about Him, and He spoke to them the words of eternal life. {DA 216.7}

Thus the day wore away, the disciples of John seeing and hearing all. At last Jesus called them to Him, and bade them go and tell John what they had witnessed, adding, "Blessed is he, whosoever shall find none occasion of stumbling in Me." Luke 7:23, R. V. The evidence of His divinity was seen in its adaptation to the needs of suffering humanity. His glory was shown in His condescension to our low estate. {DA 217.1}

The disciples bore the message, and it was enough. John recalled the prophecy concerning the Messiah, "The Lord hath anointed Me to preach good tidings unto the meek; He hath sent Me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound; to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord." Isaiah 61:1, 2. The works of Christ not only declared Him to be the Messiah, but showed in what manner His kingdom was to be established. To John was opened the same truth that had come to Elijah in the desert, when "a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and brake in pieces the rocks before the Lord; but the Lord was not in the wind: and after the wind an earthquake; but the Lord was not in the earthquake: and after the earthquake a fire; but the Lord was not in the fire:" and after the fire, God spoke to the prophet by "a still small voice." 1 Kings 19:11, 12. So Jesus was to do His work, not with the clash of arms and the overturning of thrones and kingdoms, but through speaking to the hearts of men by a life of mercy and self-sacrifice. {DA 217.2}

The principle of the Baptist's own life of self-abnegation was the principle of the Messiah's kingdom. John well knew how foreign all this was to the principles and hopes of the leaders in Israel. That which was to him convincing evidence of Christ's divinity would be no evidence to them. They were looking for a Messiah who had not been

promised. John saw that the Saviour's mission could win from them only hatred and condemnation. He, the forerunner, was but drinking of the cup which Christ Himself must drain to its dregs. {DA 218.1}

The Saviour's words, "Blessed is he, whosoever shall find none occasion of stumbling in Me," were a gentle reproof to John. It was not lost upon him. Understanding more clearly now the nature of Christ's mission, he yielded himself to God for life or for death, as should best serve the interests of the cause he loved. {DA 218.2}

After the messengers had departed, Jesus spoke to the people concerning John. The Saviour's heart went out in sympathy to the faithful witness now buried in Herod's dungeon. He would not leave the people to conclude that God had forsaken John, or that his faith had failed in the day of trial. "What went ye out into the wilderness to see?" He said. "A reed shaken with the wind?" {DA 218.3}

The tall reeds that grew beside the Jordan, bending before every breeze, were fitting representatives of the rabbis who had stood as critics and judges of the Baptist's mission. They were swayed this way and that by the winds of popular opinion. They would not humble themselves to receive the heart-searching message of the Baptist, yet for fear of the people they dared not openly oppose his work. But God's messenger was of no such craven spirit. The multitudes who were gathered about Christ had been witnesses to the work of John. They had heard his fearless rebuke of sin. To the self-righteous Pharisees, the priestly Sadducees, King Herod and his court, princes and soldiers, publicans and peasants, John had spoken with equal plainness. He was no trembling reed, swayed by the winds of human praise or prejudice. In the prison he was the same in his loyalty to God and his zeal for righteousness as when he preached God's message in the wilderness. In his faithfulness to principle he was as firm as a rock. {DA 218.4}

Jesus continued, "But what went ye out for to see? A man clothed in soft raiment? Behold, they which are gorgeously appareled, and live delicately, are in kings' courts." John had been called to reprove the sins and excesses of his time, and his plain dress and self-denying life were in harmony with the character of his mission. Rich apparel and the luxuries of this life are not the portion of God's servants, but of those who live "in kings' courts," the rulers of this world, to whom pertain its power and its riches. Jesus wished to direct attention to the contrast between the clothing of John, and that worn by the priests and rulers. These officials arrayed themselves in rich robes and costly ornaments. They loved display, and hoped to dazzle the people, and thus command greater consideration. They were more anxious to gain the admiration of men than to obtain the purity of heart which would win the approval of God. Thus they revealed that their allegiance was not given to God, but to the kingdom of this world. {DA 218.5}

"But what," said Jesus, "went ye out for to see? A prophet? yea, I say unto you, and more than a prophet. For this is he, of whom it is written,--

"Behold, I send My messenger before Thy face,
Which shall prepare Thy way before Thee. {DA 219.1}

"Verily I say unto you, Among them that are born of women there hath not risen a greater than John the Baptist." In the announcement to Zacharias before the birth of John, the angel had declared, "He shall be great in the sight of the Lord." Luke 1:15. In the estimation of Heaven, what is it that constitutes greatness? Not that which the world accounts greatness; not wealth, or rank, or noble descent, or intellectual gifts, in themselves considered. If intellectual greatness, apart from any higher consideration, is worthy of honor, then our homage is due to Satan, whose intellectual power no man has ever equaled. But when perverted to self-serving, the greater the gift, the greater curse it becomes. It is moral worth that God values. Love and purity are the attributes He prizes most. John was great in the sight of the Lord, when, before the messengers from the Sanhedrin, before the people, and before his own disciples, he refrained from seeking honor for himself, but pointed all to Jesus as the Promised One. His unselfish joy in the ministry of Christ presents the highest type of nobility ever revealed in man. {DA 219.2}

The witness borne of him after his death, by those who had heard his testimony to Jesus, was, "John did no miracle: but all things that John spake of this Man were true." John 10:41. It was not given to John to call down fire from heaven, or to raise the dead, as Elijah did, nor to wield Moses' rod of power in the name of God. He was sent to herald the Saviour's advent, and to call upon the people to prepare for His coming. So faithfully did he fulfill his

mission, that as the people recalled what he had taught them of Jesus, they could say, "All things that John spake of this Man were true." Such witness to Christ every disciple of the Master is called upon to bear. {DA 219.3}

As the Messiah's herald, John was "much more than a prophet." For while prophets had seen from afar Christ's advent, to John it was given to behold Him, to hear the testimony from heaven to His Messiahship, and to present Him to Israel as the Sent of God. Yet Jesus said, "He that is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he." {DA 220.1}

The prophet John was the connecting link between the two dispensations. As God's representative he stood forth to show the relation of the law and the prophets to the Christian dispensation. He was the lesser light, which was to be followed by a greater. The mind of John was illuminated by the Holy Spirit, that he might shed light upon his people; but no other light ever has shone or ever will shine so clearly upon fallen man as that which emanated from the teaching and example of Jesus. Christ and His mission had been but dimly understood as typified in the shadowy sacrifices. Even John had not fully comprehended the future, immortal life through the Saviour. {DA 220.2}

Aside from the joy that John found in his mission, his life had been one of sorrow. His voice had been seldom heard except in the wilderness. His was a lonely lot. And he was not permitted to see the result of his own labors. It was not his privilege to be with Christ and witness the manifestation of divine power attending the greater light. It was not for him to see the blind restored to sight, the sick healed, and the dead raised to life. He did not behold the light that shone through every word of Christ, shedding glory upon the promises of prophecy. The least disciple who saw Christ's mighty works and heard His words was in this sense more highly privileged than John the Baptist, and therefore is said to have been greater than he. {DA 220.3}

Through the vast throngs that had listened to John's preaching, his fame had spread throughout the land. A deep interest was felt as to the result of his imprisonment. Yet his blameless life, and the strong public sentiment in his favor, led to the belief that no violent measures would be taken against him. {DA 220.4}

Herod believed John to be a prophet of God, and he fully intended to set him at liberty. But he delayed his purpose from fear of Herodias. {DA 220.5}

Herodias knew that by direct measures she could never win Herod's consent to the death of John, and she resolved to accomplish her purpose by stratagem. On the king's birthday an entertainment was to be given to the officers of state and the nobles of the court. There would be feasting and drunkenness. Herod would thus be thrown off his guard, and might then be influenced according to her will. {DA 221.1}

When the great day arrived, and the king with his lords was feasting and drinking, Herodias sent her daughter into the banqueting hall to dance for the entertainment of the guests. Salome was in the first flush of womanhood, and her voluptuous beauty captivated the senses of the lordly revelers. It was not customary for the ladies of the court to appear at these festivities, and a flattering compliment was paid to Herod when this daughter of Israel's priests and princes danced for the amusement of his guests. {DA 221.2}

The king was dazed with wine. Passion held sway, and reason was dethroned. He saw only the hall of pleasure, with its reveling guests, the banquet table, the sparkling wine and the flashing lights, and the young girl dancing before him. In the recklessness of the moment, he desired to make some display that would exalt him before the great men of his realm. With an oath he promised to give the daughter of Herodias whatever she might ask, even to the half of his kingdom. {DA 221.3}

Salome hastened to her mother, to know what she should ask. The answer was ready,--the head of John the Baptist. Salome knew not of the thirst for revenge in her mother's heart, and she shrank from presenting the request; but the determination of Herodias prevailed. The girl returned with the terrible petition, "I will that thou forthwith give me in a charger the head of John the Baptist." Mark 6:25, R. V. {DA 221.4}

Herod was astonished and confounded. The riotous mirth ceased, and an ominous silence settled down upon the scene of revelry. The king was horror-stricken at the thought of taking the life of John. Yet his word was pledged, and he was unwilling to appear fickle or rash. The oath had been made in honor of his guests, and if one of them had offered a word against the fulfillment of his promise, he would gladly have spared the prophet. He gave them opportunity to speak in the prisoner's behalf. They had traveled long distances in order to hear the preaching of John, and they knew him to be a man without crime, and a servant of God. But though shocked at the girl's demand, they were too besotted to interpose a remonstrance. No voice was raised to save the life of Heaven's messenger. These men occupied high positions of trust in the nation, and upon them rested grave responsibilities; yet they had given themselves up to feasting and drunkenness until the senses were benumbed. Their heads were turned with the giddy scene of music and dancing, and conscience lay dormant. By their silence they pronounced the sentence of death upon the prophet of God to satisfy the revenge of an abandoned woman. {DA 221.5}

Herod waited in vain to be released from his oath; then he reluctantly commanded the execution of the prophet. Soon the head of John was brought in before the king and his guests. Forever sealed were those lips that had faithfully warned Herod to turn from his life of sin. Never more would that voice be heard calling men to repentance. The revels of one night had cost the life of one of the greatest of the prophets. {DA 222.1}

Oh, how often has the life of the innocent been sacrificed through the intemperance of those who should have been guardians of justice! He who puts the intoxicating cup to his lips makes himself responsible for all the injustice he may commit under its besotting power. By numbing his senses he makes it impossible for him to judge calmly or to have a clear perception of right and wrong. He opens the way for Satan to work through him in oppressing and destroying the innocent. "Wine is a mocker, strong drink is raging: and whosoever is deceived thereby is not wise." Proverbs 20:1. Thus it is that "judgment is turned away backward, . . . and he that departeth from evil maketh himself a prey." Isaiah 59:14, 15. Those who have jurisdiction over the lives of their fellow men should be held guilty of a crime when they yield to intemperance. All who execute the laws should be lawkeepers. They should be men of self-control. They need to have full command of their physical, mental, and moral powers, that they may possess vigor of intellect, and a high sense of justice. {DA 222.2}

The head of John the Baptist was carried to Herodias, who received it with fiendish satisfaction. She exulted in her revenge, and flattered herself that Herod's conscience would no longer be troubled. But no happiness resulted to her from her sin. Her name became notorious and abhorred, while Herod was more tormented by remorse than he had been by the warnings of the prophet. The influence of John's teachings was not silenced; it was to extend to every generation till the close of time. {DA 222.3}

Herod's sin was ever before him. He was constantly seeking to find relief from the accusings of a guilty conscience. His confidence in John was unshaken. As he recalled his life of self-denial, his solemn, earnest appeals, his sound judgment in counsel, and then remembered how he had come to his death, Herod could find no rest. Engaged in the affairs of the state, receiving honors from men, he bore a smiling face and dignified mien, while he concealed an anxious heart, ever oppressed with the fear that a curse was upon him. {DA 223.1}

Herod had been deeply impressed by the words of John, that nothing can be hidden from God. He was convinced that God was present in every place, that He had witnessed the revelry of the banqueting room, that He had heard the command to behead John, and had seen the exultation of Herodias, and the insult she offered to the severed head of her reprobate. And many things that Herod had heard from the lips of the prophet now spoke to his conscience more distinctly than had the preaching in the wilderness. {DA 223.2}

When Herod heard of the works of Christ, he was exceedingly troubled. He thought that God had raised John from the dead, and sent him forth with still greater power to condemn sin. He was in constant fear that John would avenge his death by passing condemnation upon him and his house. Herod was reaping that which God had declared to be the result of a course of sin,—"a trembling heart, and failing of eyes, and sorrow of mind: and thy life shall hang in doubt before thee; and thou shalt fear day and night, and shalt have none assurance of thy life: in the morning thou shalt say, Would God it were even! and at even thou shalt say, Would God it were morning! for the fear of thine heart wherewith thou shalt fear, and for the sight of thine eyes which thou shalt see." Deuteronomy 28:65-67. The

sinner's own thoughts are his accusers; and there can be no torture keener than the stings of a guilty conscience, which give him no rest day nor night. {DA 223.3}

To many minds a deep mystery surrounds the fate of John the Baptist. They question why he should have been left to languish and die in prison. The mystery of this dark providence our human vision cannot penetrate; but it can never shake our confidence in God when we remember that John was but a sharer in the sufferings of Christ. All who follow Christ will wear the crown of sacrifice. They will surely be misunderstood by selfish men, and will be made a mark for the fierce assaults of Satan. It is this principle of self-sacrifice that his kingdom is established to destroy, and he will war against it wherever manifested. {DA 223.4}

The childhood, youth, and manhood of John had been characterized by firmness and moral power. When his voice was heard in the wilderness saying, "Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make His paths straight" (Matthew 3:3), Satan feared for the safety of his kingdom. The sinfulness of sin was revealed in such a manner that men trembled. Satan's power over many who had been under his control was broken. He had been unwearied in his efforts to draw away the Baptist from a life of unreserved surrender to God; but he had failed. And he had failed to overcome Jesus. In the temptation in the wilderness, Satan had been defeated, and his rage was great. Now he determined to bring sorrow upon Christ by striking John. The One whom he could not entice to sin he would cause to suffer. {DA 224.1}

Jesus did not interpose to deliver His servant. He knew that John would bear the test. Gladly would the Saviour have come to John, to brighten the dungeon gloom with His own presence. But He was not to place Himself in the hands of enemies and imperil His own mission. Gladly would He have delivered His faithful servant. But for the sake of thousands who in after years must pass from prison to death, John was to drink the cup of martyrdom. As the followers of Jesus should languish in lonely cells, or perish by the sword, the rack, or the fagot, apparently forsaken by God and man, what a stay to their hearts would be the thought that John the Baptist, to whose faithfulness Christ Himself had borne witness, had passed through a similar experience! {DA 224.2}

Satan was permitted to cut short the earthly life of God's messenger; but that life which "is hid with Christ in God," the destroyer could not reach. Colossians 3:3. He exulted that he had brought sorrow upon Christ, but he had failed of conquering John. Death itself only placed him forever beyond the power of temptation. In this warfare, Satan was revealing his own character. Before the witnessing universe he made manifest his enmity toward God and man. {DA 224.3}

Though no miraculous deliverance was granted John, he was not forsaken. He had always the companionship of heavenly angels, who opened to him the prophecies concerning Christ, and the precious promises of Scripture. These were his stay, as they were to be the stay of God's people through the coming ages. To John the Baptist, as to those that came after him, was given the assurance, "Lo, I am with you all the days, even unto the end." Matthew 28:20, R. V., margin. {DA 224.4}

God never leads His children otherwise than they would choose to be led, if they could see the end from the beginning, and discern the glory of the purpose which they are fulfilling as co-workers with Him. Not Enoch, who was translated to heaven, not Elijah, who ascended in a chariot of fire, was greater or more honored than John the Baptist, who perished alone in the dungeon. "Unto you it is given in the behalf of Christ, not only to believe on Him, but also to suffer for His sake." Philippians 1:29. And of all the gifts that Heaven can bestow upon men, fellowship with Christ in His sufferings is the most weighty trust and the highest honor. {DA 224.5}