

The Life of JESUS CHRIST

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Chapter 3

THE FINAL STAGES OF HIS PREPARATION

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40-43. The Final Stages of His Preparation.

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40. Meanwhile He, whom so many in their own ways were hoping for, was in the midst of them, though they suspected it not. Little could they think that He about whom they were speculating and praying was growing up in a carpenter's home away in despised Nazareth. Yet so it was. There He was preparing Himself for His career. His mind was busy grasping the vast proportions of the task before Him, as the prophecies of the past and the facts of the case determined it; His eyes were looking forth on the country, and His heart smarting with the sense of its sin and shame. In Himself He felt moving the gigantic powers necessary to cope with the vast design; and the desire was gradually growing to an irresistible passion, to go forth and utter the thought within Him, and do the work which had been given Him to do.

41. JESUS had only three years to accomplish His lifework. If we remember how quickly three years in an ordinary life pass away, and how little at their close there usually is to show for them, we shall see what must have been the size and quality of that character, and what the unity and intensity of design in that life, which in so marvelously short a time made such a deep and ineffaceable impression on the world, and left to mankind such a heritage of truth and influence.

42. It is generally allowed that JESUS appeared as a public man with a mind whose ideas were completely developed and arranged, with a character sharpened over [37] its whole surface into perfect definiteness, and with designs that marched forward to their ends without hesitation. No deflection took place during the three years from the lines on which at the beginning of them He

was moving. The reason of this must have been, that, during the thirty years before His public work began, His ideas, His character and designs went through all the stages of a thorough development. Unpretentious as the external aspects of His life at Nazareth were, it was, below the surface, a life of intensity, variety and grandeur. Beneath its silence and obscurity there went on all the processes of growth which issued in the magnificent flower and fruit to which all ages now look back with wonder. His preparation lasted long. For one with His powers at command, thirty years of complete reticence and reserve were a long time. Nothing was greater in Him afterwards than the majestic reserve in both speech and action which characterized Him. This, too, was learned in Nazareth. There He waited till the hour of the completion of His preparation struck. Nothing could tempt Him forth before the time- - not the burning desire to interfere with indignant protest amidst the crying corruptions and mistakes of the age, not even the swellings of the passion to do His fellow-men good.

43. At last, however, He threw down the carpenter's tools, laid aside the workman's dress, and bade His home and the beloved valley of Nazareth farewell. Still, however, all was not ready. His manhood, though it had waxed in secret to such noble proportions, still required a peculiar endowment for the work He had to do; and His ideas and designs, mature as they were, required to be hardened in the fire of a momentous trial. The two final incidents of His preparation - the Baptism and the Temptation - had still to take place.

44. **His Baptism** - JESUS did not descend on the nation from the obscurity of Nazareth without note of warning. [38] His work may be said to have been begun before He Himself put His hand to it.

45. Once more, before hearing the voice of its Messiah, the nation was to hear the long-silent voice of prophecy. The news went through all the country that in the desert of Judaea a preacher had appeared - not like the mumblers of dead men's ideas who spoke in the synagogues, or the courtier-like, smooth-tongued teachers of Jerusalem, but a rude, strong man, speaking from the heart to the heart, with the authority of one who was sure of his inspiration.

- He had been a Nazarite from the womb;
- he had lived for years in the desert, wandering, in communion with his own heart, beside the lonely shores of the Dead Sea;
- he was clad in the hair cloak and leather girdle of the old prophets; and
- his ascetic rigor sought no finer fare than locusts and the wild honey which he found in the wilderness.

Yet he knew life well; he was acquainted with all the evils of the time, the hypocrisy of the religious parties, and the corruption of the masses: he had a wonderful power of searching the heart and shaking the conscience, and without fear laid bare the darling sins of every class. But that which most of all attracted attention to him and thrilled every Jewish heart from one end of the land to the other, was the message which he bore. It was nothing less than that the Messiah was just at hand, and about to set up the kingdom of GOD. All Jerusalem poured out to him; the Pharisees were eager to hear the Messianic news; and even the Sadducees were stirred for a moment from their lethargy. The provinces sent forth their thousands to his preaching, and the scattered and hidden ones who longed and prayed for the redemption of Israel flocked to welcome the heart-stirring promise. But along with it John had another message, which excited

very different feelings in different minds. He had to tell his hearers that the nation as a whole was utterly unprepared for the Messiah; that the mere fact of their descent from Abraham [39] would not be a sufficient token of admission to His kingdom; it was to be a kingdom of righteousness and holiness, and CHRIST's very first work would be to reject all who were not marked with these qualities, as the farmer winnows away the chaff with his fan, and the master of the vineyard hews down every tree that brings forth no fruit. Therefore he called the nation at large - every class and every individual - to repentance, so long as there still was time, as an indispensable preparation for enjoying the blessings of the new epoch; and, as an outward symbol of this inward change, he baptized in the Jordan all who received his message with faith. Many were stirred with fear and hope and submitted to the rite, but many more were irritated by the exposure of their sins and turned away in anger and unbelief. Among these were the Pharisees, upon whom he was specially severe, and who were deeply offended because he had treated so lightly their descent from Abraham, on which they laid so much stress.

46. One day there appeared among the Baptist's hearers One who particularly attracted his attention, and made his voice, which had never faltered when accusing in the most vigorous language of reproof even the highest teachers and priests of the nation, tremble with self-distrust. And, when He presented Himself, after the discourse was done, among the candidates for baptism, John drew back, feeling that this was no subject for the bath of repentance, which without hesitation he had administered to all others, and that he himself had no right to baptize Him. There were in His face a majesty, a purity and a peace which smote the man of rock with the sense of unworthiness and sin. It was JESUS, who had come straight hither from the workshop of Nazareth. John and JESUS appear never to have met before, though their families were related and the connection of their careers had been predicted before their birth. This may have been due to the distance of their homes in Galilee and Judaea, and still more to the Baptist's [40] peculiar habits. But, when, in obedience to the injunction of JESUS, John proceeded to administer the rite, he learned the meaning of the overpowering impression which the Stranger had made on him; for the sign was given by which, as GOD had instructed him, he was to recognize the Messiah, whose forerunner he was. The HOLY GHOST descended on JESUS, as He emerged from the water in the attitude of prayer, and the voice of GOD pronounced Him in thunder His beloved Son.

47. The impression made on John by the very look of JESUS reveals far better than many words could do His aspect, when He was about to begin His work, and the qualities of the character which in Nazareth had been slowly ripening to full maturity.

48. The baptism itself had an important significance for JESUS. To the other candidates who underwent the rite it had a double meaning: it signified the abandonment of their old sins, and their entrance into the new Messianic era. To JESUS it could not have the former meaning, except in so far as He may have identified Himself with His nation, and taken this way of expressing His sense of its need of cleansing. But it meant that He too was now entering through this door into the new epoch, of which He was Himself to be the Author. It expressed His sense that the time had come to leave behind the employments of Nazareth and devote himself to His peculiar work.

49. But still more important was the descent upon Him of the HOLY GHOST This was neither a meaningless display nor merely a signal to the Baptist. It was the symbol of a special gift then given to qualify Him for His work, and crown the long development of His peculiar powers. It is

a forgotten truth that the manhood of JESUS was from first to last dependent on the HOLY GHOST. We are apt to imagine that its connection with His divine nature rendered this unnecessary. On the contrary, it made it far more necessary, for in order to be the organ of His [41] divine nature, His human nature had both to be endowed with the highest gifts and constantly sustained in their exercise. We are in the habit of attributing the wisdom and grace of His words, His supernatural knowledge of even the thoughts of men, and the miracles He performed, to His divine nature. But in the Gospels these are constantly attributed to the HOLY GHOST. This does not mean that they were independent of His divine nature, but that in them His human nature was enabled to be the organ of His divine nature by a peculiar gift of the HOLY GHOST. This gift was given Him at His baptism. It was analogous to the possession of prophets, like Isaiah and Jeremiah, with the Spirit of inspiration on those occasions, of which they have left accounts, when they were called to begin their public life, and to the special outpouring of the same influence still sometimes given at their ordination to those who are about to begin the work of the ministry. But to Him it was given without measure, while to others it has always been given only in measure; and it comprised especially the gift of miraculous powers.

50. **The Temptation** - An immediate effect of this new endowment appears to have been one often experienced, in less degree, by others who, in their own measure, have received this same gift of the Spirit for work. His whole being was excited about His work, His desires to be engaged in it were raised to the highest pitch, and his thoughts were intensely occupied about the means of its accomplishment. Although His preparation for it had been going on for many years, although His whole heart had long been fixed on it, and His plan had been clearly settled, it was natural that, when the divine signal had been given that it was forthwith to commence, and He felt Himself suddenly put in possession of the supernatural powers necessary for carrying it out, His mind should be in a tumult of crowding thoughts and feelings, and He should seek a [42] place of solitude to revolve once more the whole situation. Accordingly, He hastily retreated from the bank of the Jordan, driven, we are told, by the Spirit, which had just been given Him, into the wilderness, where, for forty days, He wandered among the sandy dunes and wild mountains, His mind being so highly strung with the emotions and ideas which crowded on Him that He forgot even to eat.

51. But it is with surprise and awe we learn that His soul was, during those days, the scene of a frightful struggle. He was tempted of Satan, we are told. What could He be tempted with at a time so sacred? To understand this we must recall what has been said of the state of the Jewish nation, and especially the nature of the Messianic hopes which they were indulging. They expected a Messiah who would work dazzling wonders and establish a world-wide empire with Jerusalem as its center, and they had postponed the ideas of righteousness and holiness to these. They completely inverted the divine conception of the kingdom, which could not but give the spiritual and moral elements precedence of material and political considerations. Now what JESUS was tempted to do was, in carrying out the great work which His Father had committed to Him, to yield in some measure to these expectations. He must have foreseen that, unless He did so, the nation would be disappointed and probably turn away from Him in unbelief and anger. The different temptations were only various modifications of this one thought.

- The suggestion that He should turn stones into bread to satisfy His hunger was a temptation to use the power of working miracles, with which He had just been endowed, for a purpose inferior to those for which alone it had been given, and was the precursor of such temptations in His

after-life as the demand of the multitude to show them a sign, or that He should come down from the cross, that they might believe Him.

- The suggestion that He should leap from the pinnacle of the temple was probably [43] also a temptation to gratify the vulgar desire for wonders, because it was a part of the popular belief that the Messiah should appear suddenly, and in some marvellous way; as, for instance, by a leap from the temple roof into the midst of the crowds assembled below.

- The third and greatest temptation, to win the empire of all the kingdoms of the world by an act of worship to the Evil One, was manifestly only a symbol of obedience to the universal Jewish conception of the coming kingdom as a vast structure of material force. It was a temptation which every worker for GOD, weary with the slow progress of goodness, must often feel, and to which even good and earnest men have sometimes given way- - to begin at the outside instead of within, to get first a great shell of external conformity to religion, and afterwards fill it with a reality. It was the temptation to which Mahomet yielded when he used the sword to subdue those whom he was afterwards to make religious, and to which the Jesuits yielded when they baptized the heathen first and evangelized them afterwards.

52. It is with awe we think of these suggestions presenting themselves to the holy soul of JESUS. Could He be tempted to distrust GOD, and even to worship the Evil One? No doubt the temptations were flung from Him, as the impotent billows retire broken from the breast of the rock on which they have dashed themselves. But these temptations pressed in on Him, not only at this time, but often before in the valley of Nazareth, and often afterwards, in the heats and crises of His life. We must remember that it is no sin to be tempted, it is only sin to yield to temptation. And, indeed, the more absolutely pure a soul is, the more painful will be the point of the temptation, as it presses for admission into his breast.

53. Although the tempter only departed from JESUS for a season, this was a decisive struggle; he was thoroughly beaten back, and his power broken at its heart. Milton has indicated this by finishing his *Paradise Regained* at [44] this point. JESUS emerged from the wilderness with the plan of His life, which, no doubt, had been formed long before, hardened in the fire of trial. Nothing is more conspicuous in His after-life than the resolution with which He carried it out. Other men, even those who have accomplished the greatest tasks, have sometimes had no definite plan, but only seen by degrees in the evolution of circumstances the path to pursue; their purposes have been modified by events and the advice of others. But JESUS started with His plan perfected, and never deviated from it by a hair's-breadth. He resented the interference of His mother or His chief disciple with it as steadfastly as He bore it through the fiery opposition of open enemies. And His plan was to establish the kingdom of GOD in the hearts of individuals, and rely not on the weapons of political and material strength, but only on the power of love and the force of truth. [45] [Page 46 left blank]

PART II

THE DIVISIONS OF HIS PUBLIC MINISTRY

54. The public ministry of JESUS is generally reckoned to have lasted three years. Each of these had peculiar features of its own.

The first may be called the Year of Obscurity, both because the records of it which we possess are very scanty, and because He seems during it to have been only slowly emerging into public notice. It was spent for the most part in Judea.

The second was the Year of Public Favor, during which the country had become thoroughly aware of Him, His activity was incessant, and His fame rang through the length and breadth of the land. It was almost wholly passed in Galilee.

The third was the Year of Opposition, when the public favor ebbed away, His enemies multiplied and assailed Him with more and more pertinacity, and at last He fell a victim to their hatred. The first six months of this final year were passed in Galilee, and the last six in other parts of the land.

55. Thus the life of the Savior in its external outline resembled that of many a reformer and benefactor of mankind. Such a life often begins with a period during which the public is gradually made aware of the new man in its midst; then passes into a period when his doctrine or reform is borne aloft on the shoulders of popularity; and ends with a reaction, when the old prejudices and interests which have been assailed by him rally from his attack and, gaining to themselves the passions of the crowd, crush him in their rage. [47]

~ end of chapter 3 ~
