

JOURNEY WITH JESUS

A... *THE PIONEER*

3. Jordan Prelude.

Luke 3:1-18. Luke the conscientious historian gives us the setting, at the outset of this chapter, of the inauguration of the ministry of Jesus so that we can pinpoint the date to 25 or 26 A.D. It is a fine juxtaposition of the civil, secular and religious scene into which the New Life was coming, and with this Luke ushers in the one prophesied to be the herald of Jesus – John the Baptist. Matthew, Mark and Luke each quote **Isaiah’s prophecy (40:3)** as they introduce John, and Luke continues to verse 6, describing the necessary improvements to the road that were usually made to facilitate the journey of a king, just as John the Baptist, in calling Israel to confession and repentance, was preparing the way for the King of the Jews to come with his New Life. John’s message in **Matthew 3:2**, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near”, is repeated by Jesus in **Matthew 4:17** and it is interesting to note that the principle of the Kingdom of God is mentioned 50 times in Matthew’s gospel. Luke finishes with “*all mankind* will see God’s salvation:” time and time again, through the Old Testament and the New, we are given strong indications that Jesus came not only to the Jews, but to all mankind.

Echoing Isaiah, Luke says in verse 2, “the word of God came to John ... *in the desert.*” We can speculate that John, born to ageing parents, may have been orphaned early in life and could perhaps have been among the orphans which the sect of the Essenes were known to care for and train. If so, John’s early home would have been in the desert, maybe not too far from “the hill country of Judea” (**Luke 1:39**) where his parents had lived. If so, that would account for his ascetism, (**Matthew 3:4** mentions his clothing of camels’ hair and his food of locusts and wild honey) his knowledge of the Scriptures, his unshakeable faith and his uncompromising witness. And it is believed he baptized not too far from the Essene base at Qumram.

Even so, the religious leaders, both Pharisees and Sadducees, lost no time in checking out this rough and radical new preacher. The trouble was, he was *baptising Jews!* Baptism was a rite demanded of proselytes (incomers from other faiths) as a sign that they had renounced their old life and were now living the new life of Judaism. An Israelite was never baptised: he considered he was already God’s child, and did not need to be washed. Yet John had the temerity to call for *God’s chosen people to be cleansed!* And his response to the criticism of the religious leaders was to call them vipers! He was not a comfortable preacher. Yet it is interesting to see the sort of people who did come to him and submit to his call to repentance, among them crowds of ordinary people from all Judea, as well as soldiers and even tax collectors. One could wonder if Matthew was one of them. He describes John the Baptist in detail. From his gospel it is obvious that he had studied the Old Testament scriptures in detail, and he certainly followed Jesus whole-heartedly when he was called!

It is in **Matthew 3:13-15** that we learn Jesus came all the way from Galilee to the lower Jordan valley with the specific purpose of submitting to this baptism given by John: we marvel at his humility, his condescension. This Son of God, who had spent 30 years of his life learning what it was like to be a working man, to earn his own living and support the family if Joseph was not still alive, to have to save up in order to buy food and clothes, to cope with critical and difficult customers: the young boy who once had to learn how to tie the thongs of his own sandals, for whom John declared himself unworthy even for the slave’s job of untying those thongs! It was natural that John should balk at the irony of the situation, to which Jesus countered with the gracious words, “Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfil all righteousness.” This sinless Son of God identified himself with sinful humanity.

So Jesus was baptised, and came up out of the waters of the Jordan to be greeted with a wonderful manifestation of his Father’s approval. **Luke 3:21,22** says that as he was praying, heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. We hark back to **Isaiah 11:2** where this moment was foretold – “The Spirit of the Lord will *rest* on him” and then to **John 1:33** where John the Baptist avers “the one who sent me to baptise with water told me, ‘The man on whom

you see the Spirit come down and *remain* is he who will baptise with the Holy Spirit.” Godly men have from time to time experienced an outstanding infilling of the Holy Spirit for some special purpose: with Jesus, the Holy Spirit filled him completely and consistently. (It is interesting to note that for the Jews, the dove was a sacred bird and was never hunted nor eaten.) And this momentous ordination of Jesus was signified by the presence of the complete Trinity – the voice of God the Father expressing His love and pleasure towards His Son, the willing undertaking of ministry by the Son, and the sealing approval of that ministry by the Holy Spirit.

How much ministry do we see throughout the world that is done in the name of Jesus? How much do we see that is really done in the power of the Holy Spirit? Ministry that is done with any other motivation will not stand the test of time nor bring glory or joy to the heart of God. It is a challenge for us!

Desert Crucible. Luke 4:1-13. Yes, Jesus was full of the Holy Spirit, but that did not mean an easy road. He faced now a tortuous crucible of testing: it was here that he needed every divine and human resource available to him. The Spirit did not let him down: **verse 1** says he led Jesus *in* the desert (not just into): during those 6 weeks of fasting and ongoing temptation by the devil, (much more than the 3 that are quoted in the gospels) the Spirit was his constant strengthener. We must not underestimate the stress or the importance of the situation. Jesus must have told his disciples about it for there to be 3 accounts of it in the gospels: he must have needed to bare his soul for him to have shared this sacred and intimate experience with them.

It was also a time of decision: just as God had given mankind freewill, so did His Son have the freedom to exercise his own will, make his own decisions and settle on his own choices. At this outset of his ministry he had to choose the strategies he would use. Of course, the heart and soul and mind and body of Jesus were so much in harmony with the nature of his Father, that it came naturally to him to work always in conformity with what his Father would have done. So it is that we see Jesus choosing uncompromisingly to reject the way of power and glory, and accepting the way of suffering and the Cross.

The wilderness of Judea was called Jeshimmon, - “The Devastation.” The hills were like dust heaps, the limestone blistered and peeling, the rocks bare and jagged. The heat was like a furnace and the land ended in high and forbidding precipices which swept down grotesquely to the Dead Sea. It was here that Jesus wrestled for 40 foodless days - Mark adds that he also had to contend with wild animals - in the battle that did not end until the Cross, for throughout the gospels we see the traps the devil continued to set to deflect Jesus’ determination to carry out the will of his Father.

In the first temptation the devil, counting on Jesus’ hunger-induced weakness, gave him a twofold challenge – to prove his claim that he was the Son of God by using his divine power to satisfy himself. Both knew that one of the signs expected of the Messiah was the ability to feed his people: in **Isaiah 49**, regarded as a messianic prophecy, verse 10 says, “They will neither hunger nor thirst.” Later in **John 6:30 ff** the crowd would challenge Jesus to prove his messiahship by providing bread from heaven as Moses had done. Jesus countered this by quoting **Deuteronomy 8:3** – that true life does not consist in pleasing only oneself, but in accepting and following the eternal Word of God.

In the second temptation the “father of lies” resorted to his stock-in-trade with the utterly baseless claim that all the authority and power of the world was in his hands. All Jesus had to do was to join forces with him and that power would be his. But Jesus knew that God had promised to him as the Messiah, all the power and authority of the world, and to try and wrest it from God in his own way was right against God’s will. Again Jesus used the “sword” of the Word of God as he quoted **Deuteronomy 6:13** - God alone must be worshipped and served. No-one else would ever have that right.

The last temptation came as Jesus stood in imagination on the pinnacle of the Temple where Solomon’s Porch and the Royal Porch met. It was a giddy height, with a sheer drop of 135 metres down into the Kedron Valley below. To float down and land uninjured would be a feat

astonishing enough to convince surely the greatest sceptic – although, outside the Temple, how many passers-by would see it happen? But the devil misquoted the promise that God had given in **Psalm 91:11,12**, omitting “in all your ways” and so reducing the import of the passage from a general rule of life to one of particular expediency, and one obviously against God’s will. Again this passage was regarded as a messianic prophecy and the devil used that to taunt Jesus with the sceptical “If you are the Son of God” - i.e. prove it! And again Jesus used Scripture as his defence, quoting **Deuteronomy 6:16** where Israel, while trusting in the providence of God, must not put God to the test with some stupid notion of their own. It is interesting that Jesus used these verses from the context of Israel being put to the test by God in the wilderness. Jesus was a true Israelite!

What is our greatest comfort from this passage? Surely, that Jesus understands the torture of temptation, and will never leave us to cope alone. His Word is a mighty weapon, His love is our superhuman strength.

The Lamb of God. John 1:29-34. From his acid test in the wilderness Jesus returned to the place where John the Baptist was still baptising and made his way directly to him: we can surmise that Jesus felt the need for some fellowship with his cousin, the one who alone, beside himself, had any idea of the road Jesus was about to tread. We wonder how much time the cousins had spent together as children – they lived far apart from each other – and how much John had been told of their two miraculous births. How much inkling did John have that Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah?

For sure, John seemed aware of the status and purpose of Jesus. Although Jesus was the younger by 6 months in a culture where age was respected, John acknowledged Jesus’ superiority over himself, his pre-existence, (**verse 30**) and his power and influence set to increase while John himself would fade into the background. Greater than John’s ministry, Jesus would baptise his followers with the Holy Spirit and with fire and eventually he would preside in judgement over all mankind. And as John saw Jesus coming towards him from the desert, he was able to declare with unwavering faith, “Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world”(verse 29). Even John seemed to realise that Jesus had come not only to the Jews! So that there could be no possible mistake, God had given John a sign of confirmation, as John recounted in **verse 33**, “The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is he who will baptise with the Holy Spirit.” And in the next verse John reaches the heights of faith and adoration - “I have seen and I testify that this is the Son of God.”

The first disciples. John 1:35-51. Jesus was still there the next day. We could wonder if he and John had spent the evening together. Today it is acknowledged that pastors and leaders need to spend time together for mutual encouragement and support. Jesus and John would have had a lot to talk about! Jesus was looking for disciples, and the logical place to begin would be with the disciples of John, already prepared by him for the arrival of someone of great significance. The gracious Jesus would have been careful to discuss this strategy with John, and maybe the self-effacing John even advised Jesus on suitable candidates! In **verse 42** Jesus actually went looking for Philip; could it be possible that John had recommended Philip to him? Does that sound too much like just using plain common sense? Did Jesus need to use common sense? We need to remember that the Holy Spirit has more common sense than the rest of us put together, and as Jesus and John were both full of the Holy Spirit, any “common sense” decisions they made would have been right. And in case we feel that this shows too much the completely human side of Jesus, in **verse 48** we are given a reminder of his complete divinity as he shows his supernatural knowledge regarding Nathanael.

How do you assess the guidance of God? Is it through some supernatural revelation, an irresistible urge, a deep unsatisfied longing, or just plain common sense? There is no one answer. God uses different methods with different people, for He alone knows how best to convince us. We need always to keep an open mind, a willing heart, and be ready for whatever is His will. He is too kind to leave us in the dark.

We cannot possibly understand how the human and divine were so perfectly blended in Jesus. Nor should we worry that we cannot: if we could understand God we wouldn’t need Him. We

need just to accept Him and acknowledge that He is far beyond us in wisdom and understanding: that is the trust for which He asks.

This passage at the beginning of Jesus' ministry is full of a calm beauty, a quiet charm and a steady confidence in the working out of God's plan. With no dramatic fanfare John the Baptist looked at Jesus passing by and simply declared, "Look, the Lamb of God!" He had only 2 of his disciples with him – were they the ones in particular who were on his own wave length? - and as they looked, they followed. It was the reaction he had trained them for, and dear John selflessly gave them up.

Tentatively they followed Jesus, and this was perhaps the sign for which Jesus was waiting, for he responded quickly – as he always does to those who seek him. I can imagine his smile as he asked them graciously, "What do you want?" Their reply of "Rabbi, where are you staying?" implied a deeper question, "What are you teaching?" Jesus' simple invitation resulted in the most wonderful afternoon the two had ever spent, becoming acquainted with the enthralling Son of God.

Verse 40 could probably have been the next day. Little did Andrew realise that he was creating history when he brought his brother Peter to Jesus! (The other disciple was most likely John, the writer of this gospel.) Andrew already had heard and seen enough to convince him that Jesus was the Anointed One, the Messiah. This was the very significant start of his ministry of bringing others to Jesus. Was it simply an act of common sense? If so, it was sealed with divine approval, as Jesus, looking deep into the face of Peter, gave a prophecy of what the future held for him.

Jesus seemed in no hurry to leave the Jordan area. Was he aware that he and John would never meet again? **Verse 43** tells us it was another new day when he took the initiative of finding Philip and giving him the simple directive, "Follow me." There were many rabbis engaged in an itinerant life of teaching, and usually disciples would choose which teacher they would follow. But here Jesus chose his own disciples. **Ephesians 1:4** drives this home - "He chose us in him before the creation of the world." When one seeks to choose Jesus, he finds that Jesus has already chosen him!

Philip must have been enthralled at the thought that Jesus had actually sought him out, and lost no time in extending the invitation to his friend Nathanael, citing the prophets to prove Jesus was the Messiah. But Nathanael was sceptical: Nazareth was an obscure town never mentioned in the Old Testament, and it had become a barracks for Roman troops who bought with them their gods, their sins and their oppression of the Jews. Nothing in the prophets had indicated this would be the hometown of the Messiah! Philip was wise enough not to argue with his friend, but offered the simple invitation, "Come and see."

It is probable that, when sitting under the fig tree, Nathanael had been praying or meditating: if so, his prayers were answered beyond his wildest dreams! Jesus' supernatural knowledge of him blew away every shred of scepticism and – long before Peter came to his famous confession – Nathanael with amazing faith declared, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the King of Israel." Jesus rewarded that confession by telling the little group that in the future they would be able to see God's own testimony to Him as plainly as if they heard an announcement from heaven delivered by angels.

How do we best influence our friends to come to Jesus? Arguing will annoy rather than convince them. Better to offer the simple invitation to "come and see" - to see through the undeniable way of us living a life full of the love of Jesus. Most important of all are our prayers. We are being less effective when we are talking to people about God, than when we are talking to God about people!

And so these first 5 disciples began their walk with Jesus, little realising just where it would lead them. They still had so much to learn. The important thing was that they were following Him. We can only imagine the wonderful attraction of his personality, the pure, unequalled beauty of His character – Son of Man, and Son of God!