

# 3. Into the Wilderness

## IN THE WILDERNESS PREPARE THE WAY OF YAHWEH

This wilderness principle is central to the work of John. Here is a verse that covers thirty years of John's life:

**Luke 1:80** And the child grew, and waxed strong in spirit, and was in the deserts till the day of his showing (*exhibition*) unto Israel.

John was God's exhibition! Yet he was only a voice. Later John said "What went you out to see?" (**Lk 7:24**). They came out to see a man who was a *living example* of the message he taught. In the desert he could take in the **still small voice** of God's Word.

This is a consistent Scriptural principle, Moses spent 40 years in Midian before appearing before Pharaoh (**Acts 7:29-30**). Moses developed humility during that time (**Ex 3:11**). Elijah came close to his God in the wilderness (**1 Kgs 19:4,11-18**). After David's anointing, he spent a lot of time in the wilderness before he became king. David came to trust more and more in his God. Even later in life David spent extended time in the wilderness, assessing the role of God working in his life (**Psalms 55, 63**). We have seen that the future work of Elijah involves Israel being brought into the wilderness of the people where God will plead with them face to face (**Ezek 20:33-39; Hos 2:14**). The most prominent example of the wilderness was Israel's wanderings after the Exodus from Egypt. Many of them still did not respond.

Our culture today makes it increasingly difficult for us to be in a wilderness state of mind where God is the source of all our needs. The world tells us to trust in our own strength, lead busier lives and gain more in material things as a measure of success and happiness. The wilderness wanderings are there as an example for us, that we might not be led away by evil as they were: "Let him that thinks he stands, take heed lest he fall" (**1 Cor 10:6-12**).

As with Elijah, God works with us through the wilderness of life, developing our faith slowly over time. Our response to God's Word is like seed being sown in good soil (**Luke 8:4-15**). Our minds are renewed as we are fashioned in the likeness of God (**Rom 12:2-3; 2 Cor 4:16; Eph 3:16; 4:23-24**). God's providence in the trials and experiences of life assists spiritual-mindedness. The interworking of experience and the Word produces character. This grows slowly, wonderfully, as a tree growing with leaves, blossom and fruit. As God's children we develop God's thinking over time as Christ works in us (**Jn 3:1-10; Rom 8:14-21; Gal 2:20**).

## MANNA IN THE WILDERNESS

The manna provided the Israelites with all the nutrition they ever needed. However, over time they came to hate it and longed for something better (**Num 21:5**). Manna represents God's Word. Jesus responded to temptation by saying, "It is written, Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God." (**Mt 4:4**) Jesus himself is the word made flesh (**Jn 1:14; 6:32**). He says we should labour for spiritual food rather than physical. We cannot serve two masters (**Mt 6:23-24**). Jesus himself is the bread of life. He that comes to Jesus will never hunger or thirst (**Jn 6:27-35**). He is greater than anything else in life (**Col 1:18-19**) There is something incredibly special in this.

Jesus Christ is a treasure greater than anything else life can offer, including health, wealth, comfort, even life itself. As the manna in the wilderness was enough to sustain Israel, so a personal relationship with Jesus Christ is able to sustain us through our wilderness wandering as we prepare to enter the promised land.

In the wilderness, God continued to care for his people as a father does for a son. This was a special relationship with His people.

**Deuteronomy 8:4-5** Your clothing did not wear out on you and your foot did not swell these forty years. Know then in your heart that, as a man disciplines his son, the LORD your God disciplines you. (cp. **Prov 3:11-12; Heb 12:6-10**)

## JOHN'S WILDERNESS

John literally brought people down to the wilderness of Judea. Rich and poor, all aspects of society were brought down to hear him (**Mt 3:3-7; Lk 3:7**). It was over 400 years since Israel had a prophet come to them. Many were expecting Messiah to appear, because of the seventy weeks prophecy in **Daniel 9:24-27**. "People were in expectation, and all men mused in their hearts of John, whether he were the Christ, or not" (**Lk 3:15**) John lived what he preached and this was clear to the people of his day (**Mt 21:23-27**). John's message was a "burning and shining light" (**Jn 5:35**). He was an introduction to the true light of the world (**Jn 8:12**). Do those in the world look at us and see that we are different? Do they see in us the love and compassion of Jesus Christ in the way we talk, the way we care for and reach out to others? Do they see the Word of God as powerful in our life? This is the lesson of John's life.

The wild honey John ate (**Mt 3:4**) represents a beautiful principle in Scripture. God's Word is likened to honey (**Psa 19:10; 119:103; Prov 16:24; Song 4:11; 5:1; Isa 7:15; Ezek 3:3; Rev 10:9,10**) The manna from heaven tasted like honey (**Ex 16:31; Jn 6:35-41**). Wild honey is very precious and only found by those who diligently search for it in the desert (**Deut 32:10-13**).

## LUKE 3:1-18 JOHN'S MESSAGE TO THE PEOPLE

The parallel Scriptures are **Mt 3:1-12; Mk 1:2-8**. These introduce John as the voice of **Isaiah 40**. John himself draws this comparison in **John 1:23**. We have seen that the spirit and power that Elijah learnt at the end of his life is expressed in **Isaiah 40:1-5**. Careful reading of **Isaiah 40:3** reveals a parallelism: 1. "In the wilderness prepare the way of Yahweh" 2. "make straight in the desert a highway for our God." We can only prepare the way of Yahweh when we remove self-importance and the influences of this world. **Luke** quotes this entire section from **Isa 40:3-5**. Mark adds the reference to **Mal 3:1** "Behold I send my messenger."

John's preaching brought all people to a realisation that all flesh is grass. Unless there is repentance, all flesh passes away. The words of **Lk 3:5-6** are explained in **Lk 3:7-14**. The **valleys** are the common people (**3:10**). The **mountains and hills** are the Scribes and Pharisees, a generation of vipers (**3:7**). The **crooked** are the tax collectors (**3:12**). The **rough ways** are the soldiers (**3:14**). John's preaching essentially put everyone on the same level before God. John describes the **Scribes and Pharisees** as a brood of vipers (**Lk 3:7-9**), the seed of the serpent of their generation.



They followed after the way of Cain (**Gen 3:15; 4:8; Mt 23:33; Jn 8:39,44**). He warns them to flee from the wrath to come in AD70 (**Lk 21:23**). He also warns of judgment coming on Israel (**Lk 3:9**).

The **common people** came to John asking, "what shall we do?" His answer was simple, practical and challenging. He tells them to give to those who are less fortunate than themselves, to love their neighbour (**Lk 3:11** cp. **Lev 19:18**). This continues through the New Testament (**Mt 25:34-40; Jas 2:15-17; 1 Jn 3:17-18**). **Tax collectors** were one of the most hated groups as they were often wealthy from collecting more than they legally had to (**Mt 9:10-11; 10:3; 11:19; Lk 5:29-30; 15:1-2**). Jesus' response (in **Lk 3:13**) was one we must apply in all our business dealings. That is to act fairly and not be greedy or unlawful in our actions. His response to the **soldiers** was consistent with the context about wealth and their role with the tax collectors of extorting money from people (**Lk 3:13**).

John's teachings were based on **Isaiah 40**, the principles of which are summarised in **Isa 40:10-11** which we have seen describes Christ's role as father and shepherd, the principle Elijah will apply in his future work: "He will gather the lambs in his arms; he will carry them in his bosom, and gently lead those that are with young."

## JOHN'S BAPTISING IN THE RIVER JORDAN

The river Jordan has an important Biblical background. It was the border of the promised land (**Gen 13:10-11; Num 33:51-52; 34:12; Jdg 3:28-29**). Jordan was typical of human life. The river flows from Mt Hermon and makes its way down into the sea of Galilee (sea of life). From here it snakes its way down to the Dead Sea, a natural flow of life ending in death. Two significant events at Jordan are the crossing of the river by the Israelites (**Josh 3:1-5:1**) and the healing of Naaman the Syrian (**2 Kgs 5:1-19**). After almost 40 years, many Israelites were seduced away from God, just as the promised land was in sight (**Num 25,31; Deut 31**). The priests were first to enter the land, carrying the ark of the covenant, symbolic of Christ (**Num 7:89; Josh 1:2; 3:6-11**). The ark stopped the natural flow of life, ending in death (**Josh 3:9-17; 4:7**). Jesus Christ was victorious over human nature, opening a path to eternal life (**Rom 6:23**).

Similarly, the story of Naaman (**2 Kgs 5:14-17**) tells a story that points to baptism. He humbled himself and obeyed Elisha (cp. **Mk 16:15-16**). He was fully immersed (cp. **Acts 8:38-39**). He rose the seventh time, to newness of life (cp. **Rom 6:4; Eph 4:22-24**). His skin was like a little child's, symbol of past sins forgiven (**Acts 22:16; 1 Pet 2:2; Rev 1:5**). He went on his way rejoicing, as we do (**Acts 8:39; 16:34; Rom 6:11-23**). For important principles relating to **Baptism into Jesus Christ**, see the separate summary sheet.

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