

Promises for the Task

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[0 : 0 0] Now as some of you will remember we've been going through a mini-series that we're entitled Sweeter Than Honey and we looked first of all a couple of weeks ago at Jonathan and the Israelite army in the wood at the time of pursuing the Philistines and how Saul forbade them from eating anything and how the honey dropped on the ground and how Jonathan partook of it and was strengthened and the Israelites didn't because they obeyed Saul's command and it was we might say an opportunity missed. And then last Wednesday we were looking at David in the Psalms, particularly Psalm 119, how imbibing God's truth and as it were drinking in and delighting in God's word which must we say have been his meditation and his private practice although it's not mentioned in any of the public narrative about his reign but if he delighted so in the law of his God and in the scriptures then it must have been something he did a great deal of in private and obviously delighted in and we read how he regarded it as sweeter than honey to his taste and we said that was an opportunity grasped. So much then for the opportunities.

I want us to look this evening at how God equips his servant for the task that he has and we might entitle this or subtitle it provision for the task. John the Baptist in this chapter is given a unique task to be the forerunner of the Messiah. The Messiah for which Israel had been waiting for hundreds of years.

But in the run up to this there had been apart from the initial glimmer of hope and of anticipation and expectation at the time of Jesus' birth that was 30 years gone past and when nothing seemed to have happened. God didn't seem to have been doing anything in the meantime but these were if you like the silent years of Jesus' life. Traditionally we don't know how accurate the tradition is but of course Luke tells us that Jesus began to be about 30 years of age at the time of the beginning of his ministry. Now that word about can cover a multitude of possibilities. He could be anything from 30 itself all the way through to perhaps nearly 40. In other words it's somewhere in his 30s and his ministry is reckoned calculated approximately to have been about 3, 3 and a half years. So if Jesus did live for 33 years and began his public ministry aged about 30 then it means that as one commentator has put it for 10 elevenths of his life we know virtually nothing about his life.

That quiet time of obscurity, of preparation, of observing, learning his earthly father's trade, providing no doubt for his family Mary and his brothers and sisters and so on. The likelihood is that Joseph died at some point during that time and Jesus would have taken on the earthly responsibilities of head of the family at that time but we're not told anything about that.

It's all in a sense speculation albeit informed speculation because we can work out some of these details. But if Jesus was apart from that incident when he was 12 in the temple at 30 silent years 10 elevenths of his life John the Baptist we know to have been approximately half a year older than Jesus.

[3 : 3 8] Now remember that John the Baptist was from a priestly family. His father Zacharias was one of the priests from the line or the course of Abijah and Abijah is mentioned in 2nd Chronicles I think it's chapter 24 but could be wrong about that where he's listed amongst all the different courses of the priests by which they served.

And Zacharias then was undertaking his ministry in the temple when the angel Gabriel appeared to him. So John is basically a priest a son of a priest and it was hereditary in those days at that time so he was a priest and priests did not embark upon their public duties until 30 years of age.

So the likelihood is that John was in the wilderness and was beginning his public ministry for anything up to 6 months prior to Jesus coming for his baptism and whilst of course we do still hear a wee bit about John after Jesus has been baptised and he continued to have disciples and to carry on baptising for a little while after Jesus' public ministry was about to begin not having begun but was about to begin after the baptism of Jesus John was still around but Jesus took the putting of John into prison as the silencing of John as the beginning of his own public ministry.

So John is probably at work proclaiming the message he's been given for a number of months maybe as much as half a year before Jesus appears for baptism.

So if Jesus' own life is in silence up until the point of his public ministry so also is John's. We read again going back to Luke's account of the gospel how that the child that is John the Baptist chapter 1 verse 80 of Luke the child grew and waxed strong in spirit and was in the desert till the day of his showing unto Israel.

[5 : 42] Now that doesn't mean from when he was an infant baby but presumably from when he was very young or young enough to be able to survive on his own. Perhaps up until the age of about 12 he was still at home and then for the next maybe 18 years he was out there in the wilderness.

Now those who have spent time in the desert and written about it said that there is something uniquely stirring about being out in this world the unspoilt barrenness of the desert there's just sky and barrenness in the desert itself particularly perhaps at night and of course it would get extremely cold but also by day and John during that time this man from the priestly line set apart for this particular task during those formative years would have been spending all that time with God all that time drinking in the words and the spirit of God but remember he had a particular advantage because we're told if we go back again to Luke's account of the gospel the announcement that Gabriel made his father Zacharias that he shall be great in the sight of the Lord and shall drink neither wine nor strong drink he shall be filled with the

Holy Ghost even from his mother's womb so that means before John even went out into the desert he was already filled to the point of saturation with the spirit of God he must have could say it reverently oozed the spirit of God everything he did and said and touched was done in that spirit of grace of the spirit of Christ the spirit of power the Holy Ghost he was filled with the Holy Ghost from his mother's womb so when he's out in the desert all these years he is not only drinking in more and being filled more and more with God's Holy Ghost but no doubt the message is being refined and the words he is being given and the timing no doubt of the message is being revealed to him let me read an opening verse of what we read in those days came John the Baptist preaching in the wilderness of Judea and saying repent ye for the kingdom of heaven is at hand now John is of course although he's a New Testament figure he's often regarded as the last of the prophets with a capital P you know other people had gifts of prophecy in the New Testament church that John is the last of prophet capital P and here he is announcing now the end of the old dispensation and the coming of the Messiah the times will fill the kingdom of heaven is at hand this is he that was spoken of by the prophet as I say the voice of one crying in the wilderness prepare ye the way of the Lord now of course we'll come to in a minute how this is of course the spirit and the power of Elijah because if you remember at the end of Malachi the very last couple of verses of the Old Testament it says behold I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord and he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children and the heart of the children to their fathers lest they come and smite the earth with a curse now what was it that we just read about John the Baptist himself when Gabriel gave the message said he shall go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah that's what we're told he shall be filled with the Holy Ghost even from his mother's womb many of the children of Israel shall return to the Lord their God and he shall go before him in the spirit and power of Elias to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just to make ready a people prepared for the Lord in other words he's to do exactly what it is that the Lord through Malachi said Elijah was to do so he is the one in the spirit and power of Elijah whom of course when the disciples asked Jesus about Elijah for example when they're coming down the mountain of transfiguration they came down the mountain

Jesus charged him saying tell the vision to no man until the son of man be risen again from the dead and his disciples asked him saying why then see the strides that Elias must first come if you're the Messiah Lord then you know where was Elijah we've all been waiting for Elijah to come to tell us that Messiah is about to come and Jesus answered and said Elias truly shall first come and restore all things but I see unto you Elias has come already and they knew him not but have done unto him whatsoever they listed likewise also shall the son of man suffer of them in other words they didn't recognise Elijah when he came they're looking for Elijah in person instead of Elijah in the spirit and power then the disciples understood that he spake unto them of John the Baptist so we have this preparation work being done by John but all this time of course John has to survive in the wilderness we don't read that manna fell from heaven or water gushed from the rock he'd have had to find water in the usual sources he'd have had to eat while he's out there and we read that his meat was locusts and wild honey now locusts of course went ugh plague of locusts insect kind of things who want to eat that well apparently

I'm told they're very nutritious actually to eat they're also that which even way back in the dietary laws of the law of God they are amongst the clean foods so we read in chapter 11 of Leviticus verse 22 all fowls that creep going up upon the ground sorry verse 22 even these of them he may eat the locusts after his kind and the bald locusts after his kind and the beetle after his kind and the grasshopper after his kind but all other flying creeping things which are four feet they shall be an abomination unto you but locusts you are allowed to eat now we don't know whether the locusts were caught separately or that he somehow found them or whatever or perhaps the reference to wild honey which might have been either tree honey or rock honey that bees would make or whatever whether it's that which trees were going to generate themselves which is often referred to as honey wild honey in this sense that he would eat perhaps the locusts and the insects in that sense stuck to it and so he ate the locusts with the honey but either way the honey itself of course would be a rush it would be a sugar rush the glucose and the natural sugar that's in it would give John a kind of energy that he would need remember that his ministry is as Jesus says in John 5 verse 35 a burning and a shining light he is one who comes after there has been 400 years of silence after the end of the Old

[12 : 49] Testament the closing of the book of Marachai let me say right send John the Baptist after that God says and that's the end of the Old Testament and for 400 years there's been no words from God the books that we now call the Apocrypha that details some of the legends and stories of the children of Israel and the people of the Jews and how they struggled for their independence militarily yes that's all very interesting but it's not the inspired word of God there hasn't been anything from God for 400 years other than the ongoing practice of the law and the searching of the scriptures and so on but now when John appears in the desert everybody knows that John is a prophet nobody doubts it he even looks the part you know Elijah is described way back in the Old Testament when he gives his message to the kings of Israel and he said what manner of man was he which came up to meet you and told you these words and they answered him he was a hairy man and girt with a girdle of leather about his loins and he said it is

Elijah the tishvah so even the dress was the similar dress code was the similar to Elijah but it's not likely that John is saying now how am I going to make people think I'm Elijah I better dress just the way that we're told Elijah dressed no he would be using what was there what was available in the desert how would he get camel hair or camel skin probably from camel corpses if traders had been you know taking their caravans and spices or whatever across the desert and one camel or other had just given up the ghost and drop dead they're not going to bury it they're not going to waste time on that they'll take all their goods off it and leave the carcass there so probably he's able to take the skin or hair but you can weave into things there or make rough garments from it would be very rough and ready garments in his way all the years he's been out in the desert nobody's bringing him clothes as far as we know so everything he's got is just sort of gathered round him and how do you stop it from all falling off you tie a belt around your middle so he was girt with a leather garter that was sort of belt or strap he just tied his very rough clothes on he wouldn't be doing much in the way of personal grooming or barbering if he was a

Nazirite as he was meant to be he wouldn't be cutting his hair he would have looked extremely wild he would have looked if anything a bit scary probably very gaunt and just as you would expect a scary kind of powerful prophet to be but this man was so filled with the Holy Ghost that people could just tell he was a man of God he looked apart he sounded apart he wasn't afraid of anyone he told everyone that they needed to repent whether they were the Pharisees and the Sadducees whether it was Herod the King whether it was the ordinary people of the soldiers of the tax collectors he told them what they had to do Luke chapter 3 it's quite specific about the different groups of people that ask him about what must we do then if we're going to repent how do we prepare for the coming of the Messiah and he tells them if you've got two coats give one away to somebody that hasn't gone if you're a tax collector don't gather any more than you should be if you're a soldier don't do violence so you know bully anybody because you've got weapons and they haven't and so on and he told

Herod the king you have no business marrying Herodias she's your brother's wife you don't have the right to her and you shouldn't be marrying her so of course whether people are great or small he takes them on he tells them when they are out of step with God now that doesn't make you a popular guy but it did mean that people who knew they needed to repent were drawn to him there was this magnetic power to John they couldn't not listen to him and all this time the Lord sustained him by that which was naturally a current locust in the desert wild honey by which his profit was sustained nobody took food out to John as far as we know in the desert ironically all the time that he was in prison by Herod Herod would have been feeding him Herod would be keeping him alive and he would be bringing him food his jailers would be bringing him food and drink and sustaining the profit of God right up to the very end of this martyrdom but God supplied what

John needed the provision for the task the locusts and the wild honey and that honey which would be sweet and would be this sort of sugar rush and this sort of burst of power that John would need for the work that he had we might almost say is a metaphor or a symbol of John's own ministry a burning and a shining light Jesus said and you were content you were willing for a season to rejoice in his light everybody's happy to hear everybody's happy to learn but there is a sense in which to be ever learning as Paul writes to Timothy ever learning and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth starting on the journey is great but coming to the conclusion yes this is the Messiah the one he's pointed to whose shoes lacks it he's not worthy to unloose this is the Messiah this is going to be life changing this is a conclusion and more people far more people are far more willing to say yes we really need to think about that yep well I'll need to maybe give that some serious thought a few years down the line once I've got my life sorted out and once I've organised this or that aspect or perhaps worked a little longer or sold my wild oats or whatever it is then I will start thinking about it yeah

[18:50] I'll always be learning I'll always be journeying and you know you shouldn't come to any hasty conclusions you know if you're on a ship that's going down and somebody flings your life belt you know you say nah should I keep my life built or shouldn't I you know I really like to ponder the mathematical possibilities of how long I can tread water without it or whether if I put all my weight on it is that a sensible thing to do no you just grab it for your life and it's the same with salvation you grab that which the Lord has placed in front of you and it's all very well to be journeying but we've got to come to the conclusion John points people to the conclusion behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world but it is not a long ministry we don't know how long of course John is actually in the wilderness for it is probably only a matter of months if he is six months older than Jesus roughly and he begins his ministry when he's 30 years old that priestly and prophetic ministry although he hasn't got the kingship aspect that Jesus has then it's likely that he is undertaking this ministry for several months before

Jesus is baptized after Jesus baptism John continues baptizing as we read in John's account of the gospel and then when he is put into prison which is only going to be a short time after that because there's not that long that continues between Jesus own baptism and the beginning of his public ministry yes he goes off into the wilderness and he's tempted 40 days and 40 nights all that time John will be carrying on his ministry Jesus comes back again he's got the wedding of Cana in Galilee he's got the encounter with Nicodemus he's got the incident with a woman at the well of Samaria and then you've got John put in prison and Jesus begins his public ministry so we're talking months we're not talking years in fact it is unlikely if John was preaching in the wilderness for even as much as a full year probably only months maybe only six seven eight months if that and that's probably it all of his life 30 years give or take preparing for these few months it's a rush it's like somebody who spends a long time in a factory or whatever preparing a spectacular firework and putting in all the wee explosives and all the light up and packing it carefully and touch paper and all the rest of it and how it's going to explode and how the colors it's going to make and then they package it and then they put it off to the shops and so on the amount of time that will have gone into preparing and packaging and doing all the right chemicals and all the right kind of explosive little powders and so on that need to go into it will be massive compared to the few seconds when that firework goes off and then they'll say ooh ah isn't it fantastic and then they move on to the next the firework may be seen for miles but it's only a couple of seconds and all that has gone into it beforehand all the hours of labour that's gone into it beforehand take that and equate it to the years of preparation for job and the few months of pointing people to the fulfilment it's an explosion of the power of

God it's a firework of God's grace it is pointing people to Jesus people heard about him from miles around they came to him from all over they went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the region round about Jordan and were baptised of him in the Jordan confessing their sins this was a spectacular appearance of a prophet of God nobody had heard a word from God for 400 years and they all knew this is a genuine prophet of God this is why Herod didn't want to execute him he said all the people took him as a prophet when Jesus was questioned by the Sadducees and the priests in the temple saying you know by what authority do you do these things and who gave you that authority he said I'll ask you one question John's baptism was it from heaven or from men and they say well if we say from heaven they'll say why didn't you listen to it but we don't dare to say from men because all the people even in the temple in

Jerusalem everywhere knew John was a prophet of God and the people knew it even if the religious leaders wouldn't have accepted it they just knew you couldn't have that much of the Holy Ghost exploding out of a servant of God and people not know this is the real day this is the prophet of the living God without fear without favour he told everyone they had to turn to the Lord and prepare for his coming now a little bit about his message here because part of what he says and what he has to say if you think about in Mark's account of the gospel where he is bringing his message and he makes reference to the fact that every mountain and hill will be laid low and the rough places plain and the way will be prepared for the Lord's coming and this is part of the message of Isaiah behold I send my messenger before the voice of one crying in the wilderness prepare ye the way the road of the

Lord now when Isaiah is talking about the rough places being made smooth and the hills being brought down and the valleys being filled in what he's talking about is making a way that's flat and smooth there weren't any roads as such in ancient Israel and Palestine there were tracks paths at most and the only time that any proper roads would be made they would be made at the king's expense he might tax the people and order them to maintain it and so on but if the king was going anywhere then they would send a message beforehand to get the people right if the road is not in a decent state you repair it up you make it smooth you make sure that all the banking is straightened up and all the paving is back on it and it's swept nice and clean your responsibility because the king is coming and his road better be clean and prepared for it he had made the road at his expense but the people were expected to maintain it so if the king was coming the road better be clear and it better have all the nasty stones cleaned out of it if there's any potholes they're going to be filled in if there's any bits that's formed away it's going to be built up again it's getting a bit crooked smooth it down and this is part of the subtext of the message the king is coming make sure that his way is clean and prepared make sure that if you're not right with God you get right with

[25 : 52] God and this is part of John's message of repentance and this repentance this message it's a spiritual message it's a prophetic message but the prophet in order to deliver this burst of divine energy coming through him and speaking through him he has to be fed and the honey the Lord provides a wild honey from a wild man if you like with the locusts here is what we might call provision for the task John's task is brief it's a lot less brief than Jesus Jesus is traditionally reckoned to have had a roughly three and a half year ministry John's is almost certainly only months not as much as a year it's a short burst of the bright burning light of the power of God of one saturated in the Holy Ghost from his mother's womb he is fed physically so that he can pour out his message spiritually but no matter how spiritual somebody else they still need physical sustenance and God does not forbear to provide for his people no matter what he calls us to he will always provide the means to do it

John cannot give his message prior to Jesus coming if he's going to die of thirst and hunger in the wilderness if he's got nothing to eat then he's going to die God provides for it he might say well lopuss and wild honey isn't exactly a feast he doesn't need a feast he only needs enough to get by sometimes we look to the Lord and we think come on Lord where's my feast and the Lord might be saying in response you don't actually need a feast all you need is enough to get by from one day to the next to the next there'll be a time for feasting there'll be a time for all the good things that God gives but for now or for the task he will provide and he does provide and it won't just be the bare necessity there will be sweetness in it and with it there will be enough for the bursts of energy you need there will be enough sweetness to give the strength and the energy and to recognize that God is providing for you in the midst of it all we will not be alas those who are drenched saturated filled with the

Holy Ghost to my mother's world the most we can hope can pray for and long for is that the Lord would pour out his spirit upon us would anoint us with it would strengthen us with it would equip us with it but no we are not John the Baptist we're not called to fulfill his particular task or ministry and so we don't need the kind of provision that he had but whatever we require along the way God will and does provide he will provide the basics and he will provide the sweetness he will provide all that you need he will provide everything you need and you will have the strength to continue until you don't need to continue anymore John's day of course came and it came to an end in Herod's dungeon where he was executed none of us knows where our last day will be but until that very last day comes until our witness is in this world extinguished by the hand of

God and by the timing of God he will continue to provide there will be provision for the task because your task in mine is not simply whatever we may be called upon to do in public we're not simply called to be a firework in the night sky we're called to be a living witness for the Lord day by day by day in our homes and in our workplace when we're being quiet and when we're being loud when we're being public and when we're being private our life is itself the witness and that will continue to be the case until the Lord pronounces it complete and until that day he will provide all that we need there will be provision for the task though it be in the very wilderness itself he will provide all that you need there will be strength and there will be sweetness and there will be the bursts of energy that you need and there will be the times of quiet in the desert just as he was with John the Baptist so he will be with you and just as he provided for the task for John so he will give provision for the task for you and me also whether honey from the rock whether locusts for our food his meat was locusts and wild honey but whatever it was the Lord required of him he gave him everything he needed and he will give likewise to us warning to be happy with God so let come through let him and him go to me