

February 24th 2013 John The Baptist #3 Made To Measure Luke 3:1-6

Looking back on my childhood I have one very clear memory of a day when I was made to feel extra special. For some reason, and thinking back I have no idea how they ever managed to afford it, my parents decided that I would have a suit made specifically for me.

I never had a suit before and I can still recall the tailor taking the measurements, marking the cloth with his chalk, and the pride I had in wearing a suit that had been made to measure for me.

Suits of course come and go. You don't usually grow into a made to measure suit but out of it. A made to measure life however, is exceedingly different. It's something that you take years to grow into and you never grow out of.

The Bible tells us that God has a Made To Measure Life planned for each one of His children. One of my most favourite verses is Ephesians 2:10 where Paul says:-

¹⁰ For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

For many years I have looked at my life and seen the truth of that. And I believe that it is a sign of God's glorious mercy and power that along the way He even uses the horrible things life throws occasionally at everyone, and the awful mistakes we at times make, to make those who follow Him into the people He wants them to be, so that He can use them in the places where he causes them to be located.

This was obviously the case with John the Baptist. We know from way back in Isaiah 40:3 that his job description as "A voice crying in the wilderness" was ordained some 700 years beforehand. Then from what we have studied so far we know that his parents were carefully chosen by God and even told that their son would be the prophet of the Most High God ***who would go before the Lord in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord(The angel's words to Zachariah)***

Such was the glorious plan, but for me it is some of the details of the outworking of that plan that give me the most encouragement.

We see in John's parents two people who were just right for producing God's prophet. Zechariah was a priest and Elizabeth was from a priestly family which meant that they both had a vast knowledge of the Old Testament and a greater than usual awareness of the prophecies relating to the coming Messiah. We are told that they were both upright in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commandments and regulations blamelessly.

When the angel told them who their son would become and the vows he would need to be taught to follow, they knew exactly what he was talking about. They didn't have to rush off and look up the OT scriptures they already knew them and believed them.

So from birth John would have been immersed in the teachings of God's Word and especially coached in the prophecies connected with the coming Messiah and the part he would play in their fulfillment.

Consequently we have in John's parents two elderly people who furnished their boy with a strong and early grounding in the truths of God, but in all probability they died while he was still a child. The Bible doesn't tell us either way, so to a great degree we are moving here from what we can be certain about to what we can only guess at.

Yet having said that we do find in Luke 1:80 some interesting and relevant information about John's childhood.

⁸⁰ And the child grew and became strong in spirit; and he lived in the desert until he appeared publicly to Israel.

Now we know that the dwelling of Zechariah and Elizabeth was not in the desert but in the Judean hills. So the question that this verse raises is, how old was the child when he began to live in the desert, because in the Greek text the semicolon we have after spirit is in fact a simple comma. The KJV gets it right when it translates the verse as:

⁸⁰ And the child grew, and waxed strong in spirit, and was in the deserts till the day of his shewing unto Israel.

Some say that he was still a boy and that the reason he found himself in the desert was because both his parents had died, and that John had been adopted by a religious community called the Essenes.

This is the group that became better known to Biblical scholars in the 1940's and 50's with the discovery of the Dead Sea scrolls. For the Essenes are the group believed to be responsible for preserving the OT Scriptures that were discovered buried in caves in the desert of Judea.

They were a monastic order who were more pharisaical than the Pharisees when it came to keeping the law of God. They separated themselves from all other communities believing them to be evil, and proclaimed that the prophecies of the sacred OT scriptures would be fulfilled in them. Josephus, the Jewish historian who wrote at the time of John the Baptist wrote of the Essenes that although they did not utterly reject marriage, they would

"seek out other persons' children, while they are pliable, and fit for learning, esteeming them to be of their kindred, and form them according to their own manners."

Now if this did happen to John then we can surely understand the deep trauma he would have experienced, for the Essenes were more strict in their teaching and discipline than any church orphanage that we could ever think of. Their teaching went against much of what John would have been taught by his godly parents about his own mission and the coming Messiah.

For example John knew that he was to be "the voice crying in the wilderness" that Isaiah 40:3 spoke about, but the Essenes taught that their organization was the fulfillment of this prophecy and in their rule book found with the Dead Sea Scrolls, they write this about their group:-

"When such men as (us) come to be in Israel, conforming to these doctrines, they shall separate from the dwelling-place of the men of perversion in order to go to the wilderness to prepare there the way of truth, as it is written (Isaiah 40:3): 'In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God!'"

Also the Essenes strongly demanded repentance followed by baptism by immersion but only for their own members.

They dressed in white linens gowns that showed their purity and separateness from the evil that clung to the rest of society.

They enforced rigid prayer time and a fasting that was also used as a self-discipline or punishment that bordered upon starvation.

If John, as a young lad, had to go through all this we can see how hard an experience it would have been for him. His life being made subject to the guiding shears of the Divine tailor, as he was gradually prepared for the life mission that God had for him. For the influence of the Essene group did not lead him away from the truth, but made the truths he had heard as a child extra real for him.

When he emerged from the desert at the age of 30 John the Baptist Knew who he was and what he had to do.

Matthew 3:1-3 says

In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the Desert of Judea and saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near." This is he who was spoken of through the prophet Isaiah:

***"A voice of one calling in the desert,
'Prepare the way for the Lord,
make straight paths for him.'"***

He knew that he was the voice mentioned by Isaiah, not the Essenes. He knew that repentance and the baptism that signified it was necessary for all people, not just a set

few, and that such was the way of forgiveness and not just ritual cleansing. And the clothes he wore were not white robes that set him apart from others, but humble garments that confirmed his place as the prophet of Almighty God.

I'm sure the experiences of John's life were not all pleasant, and the teaching he was subjected to was not always from God, but God used such things to make him into the person He needed to prepare the way for His Son.

And I strongly believe that God does the same for all of us who belong to Him. That He uses our backgrounds, our experiences both good and bad, our failures and successes to mould us into vessels that He can use.

I was speaking recently to someone who became a Christian after battling through a drug addiction, and then, some years afterwards, when God needed a believer to run a recovery centre, He placed this guy in the right place at the right time. Made to measure by God for that moment.

I will always remember the story of another man who had never been able to settle at any job. So he went from job to job and trade to trade. He either got fired or got bored and move on. Then he became a Christian and God called him to become a Missionary, and out on some isolated Mission field he found he needed all the handy bits of knowledge he had picked up during his previous unsettled employment history. Made to measure by God.

I recall a mother who had struggle greatly with her kids through their developing years. She went through years where she was estranged from her husband and received no support from him. As a Christian she relied heavily on God but at times even felt abandoned by Him too. Both her kids were addicted to drugs and her daughter became extremely promiscuous. They both spent periods in prison. One day she sensed God reminding her that He could use her because of all she had been and not despite it. And the opening suddenly came up for her to form a group, connected with a church, where she could encourage and support other parents struggling with the same issues. Made to measure by God.

God had been at work in their lives and in the life of John the Baptist so that when their call came, they were prepared and ready. But they all needed to have faith in God's call, and to be obedient to His sending.

How has God been preparing you for service? He wastes nothing in your life but will use it somehow to make you more effective than others in certain places and to certain people. Maybe the calling for you is still to come, or perhaps its beginning to open up even as I speak. As a believer God has Made you To Measure. Are you prepared today to commit yourself into The Potter's Hands.

