

Wandering in the Wilderness

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Date: 28 July 2024

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[0 : 00] Well, I'm certainly glad to be here this morning and spend this time with you. I trust that as we've already been blessed, that God will continue to bless our time together and use this time to encourage us in our walk with him.

I had the privilege of growing up in a pastor's home. My dad entered the ministry when he was kind of middle-aged. He was elected to the ministry as pastor in a small local church.

And so a lot of my formative years were spent in that kind of a home, that kind of a context. And there was a time when I was in my teenage years, a high school student, and we had a young family that came and joined us for one, not quite a year, probably maybe through the equivalent of a school year.

And they were doing an internship because they were going to go out as missionaries. And so they came and they were part of our little congregation for that time and just got to know this family and appreciated the contribution they made to our ministry and our church there.

Went out to the mission field and when they came back, they came back somewhat disillusioned because things were not what they had expected them to be. It wasn't really what they had signed up for.

[1 : 25] And I was thinking about coming to speak here and, you know, it's kind of nice when you have a period of time to prepare. I know when you have to, not have to, but when you speak to the same congregation week after week, it seems a week goes by very quickly and Sunday morning is there again.

But now that I have more free time, I have more time to think through what I'm going to speak about. And so I was thinking about what should I share here this morning?

What would God have for us this morning? And my thoughts were influenced by a book that I read written by Rabbi Jason Stobel.

And he was writing about the life of the Messiah. And one chapter he devoted to Jesus being in the desert. Jesus being led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by Satan for 40 days and 40 nights.

That time that Jesus fasted right after his baptism. And so he pointed out some different things that happened in our walk when we're in that wilderness experience.

[2 : 39] This Penner family that went out as missionaries, things weren't what they expected them to be. They were in kind of a, we might call it a desert or a wilderness experience.

Those thoughts are kind of parallel what happened with the children of Israel. When they were in slavery in Egypt and then God raised up Moses to be the one who led them into freedom, God gave them the promise of a promised land.

He had promised that to Abraham years ago, generations ago. But now was the time for the children of Israel to enter into that promised land. And so they had the opportunity to leave slavery and bondage and a place that wasn't really what God had called them, their homeland.

And they had an opportunity to go into the promised land. But they spent time traveling through the wilderness. And it wasn't what God had planned for them to be long term.

But they ended up spending 40 years in that wilderness. In Psalm 78, verse 52, and a couple of verses following, we read a little bit about that.

[3 : 54] But he brought his people out like a flock. He led them like sheep through the desert. He guided them safely so they were unafraid. But the sea engulfed their enemies.

Now he's thinking about the Red Sea and how the Egyptian army chased them and God delivered them. Thus he brought them to the border of his holy land, to the hill country his right hand had taken.

He drove out nations before them and allotted their lands to them as an inheritance. He settled the tribes of Israel in their homes. Isn't that wonderful how God can deliver people and bring them into a place of plenty, a place of blessing, a place of prosperity, a place of goodness.

That is who God is and that is what he intends for his people. And so the story of Israel and Moses and leaving Egypt and going to the promised land has so many parallels to our own walk with God. But the next verse says, But they put God to the test and rebelled against the Most High. They did not keep his statutes. But. But.

[5 : 02] God had these good plans for them. But. The people rebelled. The people were sinful. The people were doubting. They didn't trust God. And so they ended up spending that whole generation in the wilderness.

Now God doesn't intend for us to live our life in the wilderness. However, there is a time between coming to know Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior.

And maybe you've experienced the transformation that comes when you see everything with new eyes. And you have that new life. And you have that freedom that comes from the burden of sin being lifted.

And you're not carrying that guilt anymore. And you have that awareness that God loves me. That Jesus died for me. It's a personal salvation. And then you read in his word about all the wonderful promises God gives us of his presence with us.

His empowering. The way that he wants to use us. That life. We could call it life in the promised land. But what happens is that sometimes there's that transition from that newness and that freshness and that joy and that new awakening.

[6 : 14] And actually living in that place of promise. As I was thinking about this, just in the last two weeks, I've had two interesting conversations.

The first one was with our next door neighbor. Just moved in. Just getting to know him a little bit.

Found out he's a believer. And he has one of those testimonies of living in the world.

And being completely immersed in the world and in the drug culture and all of that kind of thing. And then God just radically touching him and changing his life. And now he's walking with the Lord.

And he's studying. He's working full time. But he's also studying full time in an online seminary. And he's feeling a sense of being called to ministry. But he was sharing with me that 10 years ago when he came to know the Lord, he had this wonderful transformation.

And this just a new insight into what life was all about and how he could be free from the bondage of sin. And the drugs that he was involved in. And all of that brokenness and that dysfunction.

[7 : 21] And he had this joy and this peace. And he said, but then for a while I kind of wandered. He went into that desert place.

He went into that place where it seemed as if the presence of God was not as real. It wasn't as vital. And he kind of struggled for years. And then slowly learned more. And learned about walking with the Lord.

And now he's in a good place. But he went through a time of real struggle. Another person that I talked to within the last couple of weeks is somebody that has been used in ministry.

Somebody that has training in ministry. Somebody that has been used in ministry. And was sharing with me just the other day. And I said, right now I'm in a place where I'm not seeing any sense of purpose.

I'm not content where I am. I feel that there is something that could be different, should be different. But I'm kind of stuck here. And I thought, you know, that's probably not an uncommon experience.

[8 : 23] Maybe many of you can relate to the fact that there is that joy and that freedom that come when you first come to know the Lord. And there's the great promises that God has for us.

But your daily life feels a little bit like cake without ice cream. Or cake without icing and ice cream, right? It just, it's there but it's not quite.

It doesn't feel as if you're living quite in what God has promised. Sometimes God leads us into that wilderness.

Jesus was led into the wilderness by the Spirit of God. God had a purpose in that. God had a purpose in taking the Israelites from Egypt through the wilderness to the promised land.

He didn't intend for them to be there for a whole generation. But he intended them to be there. What did he do in that wilderness? Well, Moses went up on Mount Sinai.

[9 : 25] He got the Ten Commandments. He got the instructions about building the tabernacle. These people had been immersed in a culture that was ungodly. They'd been influenced by the Egyptian culture.

Remember what they did as soon as they ran into a little bit of a test? Make us a golden calf. Well, that was a direct influence of the thinking of the Egyptians.

What did they do when they were running short of, or they got tired of their food, or they were maybe short of water? They said, you know, maybe we could go back to Egypt and we could have some of those leeks and onions and cucumbers that we used to enjoy there.

They forgot about the slavery. And they said, but there was different food there. And maybe we could just go back to that. And so they had the thinking of Egypt in their minds and God had to cleanse them of that.

He had to remove the values and the religion of Egypt from them and show them that they needed to trust in God. They needed to learn to trust in God regardless of what their circumstances or their observations suggested.

[10 : 31] And they didn't always make that test, did they? When God said, go, they said, no, we look, oh, we feel like grasshoppers.

We can't go. When God said, don't go now, they said, oh, well, you know, we've had second thoughts. Maybe we'll go now. And God said, don't go. I won't be with you. You know, years ago in Bible college, our singing group used to sing this little song about the, or the Israelites in the desert. And it went something like this. Well, don't you know that in the days of old when the Israelites didn't do what they were told? Because of their stubbornness, they failed the test.

When they wavered in their faith each time by their whining and their crying for a sign, our Lord simply told them this. Go on and take another lap around Mount Sinai till you learn your lesson. Till you stop your whining and you quit your rebelling. Till you learn to stand in your day of testing by trusting and obeying the Lord. Have you been in the situation where the Lord asked you to wait upon him, but it seemed you could not remain still?

[11 : 45] So you started planning what you're going to do because you thought the Lord had forgotten you. And just then you hear these words. Go on and take another lap around Mount Sinai.

Just the other day I heard the Lord say, Son, you've got to trust me and take another step of faith to carry you through the storm. But when the storm started getting rough, I thought the Lord wasn't strong enough.

So I started doing things on my own. Then he said, go on and take another lap around Mount Sinai till you learn your lesson. So we used to sing that song and I thought there's a lot of truth in it.

Now if you can relate to spending time in that wilderness experience, that in-between time, you're probably in very good company.

King David had been anointed by Samuel and told very specifically that he was going to be the next king of Israel.

[12 : 45] And we know what happened in his life, right? As a young lad, he went out and he fought the... It wasn't even really a battle, but he conquered Goliath, threw the whole Philistine army into confusion.

Israelites won a great victory. And King Saul said, you know, whoever defeats Goliath can become my son-in-law. David said, I'm not worthy of that.

But then years later, he did become Saul's son-in-law, married another daughter. And everything was just going fantastic for David. But we know the story of David, don't we?

How for years and years, Saul was jealous and David was running and hiding. And if we go to the book of Psalms, we read over and over and over again the Psalms that David wrote during those times.

Your Bible might have little subtitles at the beginning of the Psalm. And a lot of the Psalms talk about how David wrote this Psalm while he was fleeing from Saul, while he was in the desert of Zin, while he was with the Philistines, over and over again.

[13 : 52] You're probably very familiar with some of those words. We like to sing them. As the deer pants for the streams of water, my soul pants for you, O God.

My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When can I go and meet with God? My tears have been my food day and night, while men say to me all day long, Where is your God? These things I remember as I pour out my soul.

How I used to go with a multitude, leading the procession to the house of God, with shouts of joy and thanksgiving among the festive throng. Why are you downcast, O my soul?
Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God. My soul is downcast within me. Therefore, I will remember you from the land of Jordan, the heights of Hermon, Mount Zimer.

Then he goes on to say, I say to God, my rock, why have you forgotten me? Why must I go about mourning, oppressed by the enemy?

[14:54] My bones suffer mortal agony, as my foes taunt me, saying to me all day long, Where is your God? Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me?

Ever felt that way? Ever look back in your life and said, Boy, it was terrific. Like, God's presence was so real and so near. God's word was so alive to me.

I couldn't wait to worship with other people. God has great promises in store for me. But right now, I'm in that in-between time.

Why am I feeling this way? Why does it feel as if the problems are greater? Why does it feel as if the trials are so strong? Why do I feel as if I'm in this wilderness?

Then David ends that Psalm 42. Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God. Sometimes God develops our faith by exercising it.

[15:57] Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God. But our faith becomes stronger when it is exercised. So King David had that wilderness experience.

What about John the Baptist? Where did he spend his ministry time? Matthew chapter 3, the first couple of verses there.

John the Baptist's ministry was in the desert.

His message was, prepare the way of the Lord. But what, how do you prepare the way of the Lord? What was his message? It was, repent. Repent, for the day of the Lord is at hand.

The kingdom of heaven is at hand. Repent. Repent means change. Change your way of thinking. Change your way of living. Change your way of acting. Make an about turn.

[17:05] Learn. So the people in John the Baptist's time were probably somewhat complacent. They had waited for many years for the promise of the Messiah.

They had probably settled into, this is the way life is. None of us would ever do that. We'd never settle into, well, this is just the way life is, would we?

We always live with anticipation. We always live with hope. We always live up with optimism, don't we? But maybe some of the people needed to hear that message. Hey, you know, you've settled into the wrong thing.

You need to lift up your eyes and remember the presence of God is here, and God is doing a new thing. And so John the Baptist learned that, and he taught the people, you need to prepare your heart.

You prepare your heart by humbling yourself before God so that God will be great. John the Baptist used these words, he must increase, I must decrease.

[18:11] And that's really the bottom line. That's the bottom line of repentance. It's not about me, it's about God. And so sometimes we go into that wilderness experience because God needs to work on our attitude.

God needs to humble us. God needs to show us our dependence on him. If you think you are spending time in a wilderness and you can maybe relate to King David or John the Baptist, what about Jesus?

I mentioned earlier that after Jesus' baptism, he was led by the Spirit into the wilderness, and it says very specifically, to be tempted of the devil.

Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil. After fasting 40 days and 40 nights, he was hungry. And then if you want to read all about the temptation, you go to Matthew chapter 4 and you can read about the various temptations.

How Satan came to Jesus and how he was actually using and abusing the Word of God to try and tempt Jesus to doubt God, to disobey God, to worship the wrong things, to try to go about God's purposes in his own way.

[19:28] And it was the whole temptation, the whole time of Jesus being in the wilderness was addressing this question. Did God really save?

You know that question first came up in the Garden of Eden, didn't it? When Satan came, the serpent came and tempted Adam and Eve, his question was, did God really save? And the implication was, maybe God said something, but did he actually mean what he said? And Jesus faced Satan and he answered that question, yes, God really did save and God really does mean what he says.

And when we stand with God and are faithful to God, he hears us, he may test our loyalty, but he rewards those who diligently accept and trust and wait for him.

Hebrews chapter 4 gives us another little picture of Jesus. The end of that chapter, verse 14 and following, gives us another little picture of Jesus and that temptation and what effect that has for us. [20 : 35] Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess.

For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are, yet without sin.

Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

So sometimes we're in that wilderness place, that desert place, that place of God's seeming silence, God's maybe seeming absence, and he's testing our loyalty.

He's testing our love for him. Will we believe him? Will we trust what he has said even though the circumstances around us, even though our feelings tell us it's not working out the way it should?

[21 : 34] Will we trust that he is true and that he keeps his word? Another person who spent some time in that desert place was the Apostle Paul.

After his conversion, that dramatic conversion on the road to Damascus, then he met the Lord and right away he was on fire for God. But in Galatians chapter 1, it tells us something about his experience.

He says, I did not consult with any man, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to see those who were apostles before I was, but I went immediately into Arabia and later returned to Damascus.

Then after three years, I went up to Jerusalem to get acquainted with Peter and stayed with him 15 days. And he goes on to talk a little bit more about his experience.

But what happened in Paul's life during those three years in Arabia? Well, we know that Paul was very zealous. We know that Paul was very familiar with the Old Testament.

[22 : 37] We know that he was instructed in the Old Testament. We know that he was persecuting the church because he believed that followers of Jesus were not on the right track.

He believed that they were working against God. And so his whole thinking, his whole frame of reference, his whole worldview had to be reshaped. And I believe during that time in the desert, he learned a whole new way of understanding God's purpose and God's plan.

because he became a very strong teacher of taking the Old Testament truths and saying this is how Jesus has fulfilled what was spoken in the Old Testament.

His most basic convictions were shaken and had to be rethought. What he had believed and fought for with such passion and zeal was shown to be a tragic misunderstanding of God and God's plan of salvation.

He had to work through that. And then he became that great apostle, that great missionary that's established churches in so many places. You know, sometimes we're very sincere.

[23 : 46] Sometimes we love the word of God as much as we understand it, but God has to take us to a better understanding. Maybe we're misguided in some way. Maybe we're sometimes simply wrong.

And God has to put us in a place where he can teach us a little more of his truth. So what are some lessons that we can learn from this?

In God's economy, which comes first? Our happiness or our holiness? In God's economy, which comes first?

Our happiness or our holiness? Our peace, our well-being, our joy, it's all going to flow out of our holiness. When we come to know God, when we come to trust God fully, when we surrender ourselves and when we say, my life is yours, when we yield completely, then the fruit of all these good things are going to start to grow in our life.

Another thing we can learn is God's timing is not our timing. God's timing is not our timing. God has a lot of patience.

[24 : 58] God has a long-term plan. God has an eternal plan. We think in the moment. We think, boy, this is very uncomfortable. God says, you know, I'm shaping you for something greater. In Revelation, what do we read over and over and over again?

To him who overcomes. That means there will be testing, there will be trials, there will be things that we have to work through, there will be challenges in life. But to him who overcomes, I will give to eat of the tree of life.

There are parts of our character that are shaped in times of retreat or quietness that would not be shaped otherwise. There are things that we learn when God pulls us back.

Our understanding of God's word is at best incomplete. There are times where he has to correct something in our thinking.

Maybe being taken on that wilderness journey is a preparation for a greater, more fruitful ministry impact. Many of you are probably familiar with the story of John Bunyan, the author of Pilgrim's Progress, an allegory about how Christian leaves the city of destruction and he goes to the celestial city.

[26 : 19] And the story is all about the trials that he faces and the victories that he overcomes and the companions that he meets along the way. And it's a beautiful story that has been translated into many, many different languages.

It's a very, very popular story and it's been very helpful to many people. But you know, John Bunyan lived in the 1600s in Britain and during that time there was a lot of tension within the church because the Church of England was a state church and they had certain ways of doing things, they had certain structures, they had certain ways of organizing things and then there was a group of, they called them non-conformists they were people that said, you know, we need freedom to worship God the way that our conscience dictates according to the word of God.

We don't want to follow the structures, we don't want to stay with these traditions that are sometimes more secular than godly and we want the freedom, we need the freedom to share.

And so, there were people like the Methodists that grew out of it, there were people like the pilgrims that grew out of this non-conformist group that said, we are going to walk with God and worship God and study the word of God and seek to be faithful to him.

And John Bunyan was a pastor in this non-conformist church group and because he refused to conform to the state church, he ended up being in prison.

[27 : 53] He spent 12 and a half years in prison and his heart was to be with the people and to be pastoring the people and he used his time in prison to write.

And he wrote numerous things but among them he wrote The Pilgrim's Progress. During that time of what we might call wilderness time or desert time, John Bunyan ended up writing something that has given people a lot of guidance in their Christian walk.

It has given people hope in their struggles, it has given people an insight into some of the things that happen in our Christian life and the struggle, the spiritual conflict that is behind it.

Would he have been able to write with such insight, with such depth and such clarity if he hadn't lived that experience? So, where are you today?

If we think back to the example of the Israelites in Egypt in bondage, moving through the wilderness, entering the promised land, where are you?

[29 : 09] Perhaps there's someone here today that says, you know, when I really look at my life, I have to say, I don't know freedom in Christ. I don't know if I'm saved.

I don't know if I would die today, I don't know if I'd go to heaven. I don't know if my sins are forgiven. Maybe there's someone here that struggles with those questions.

And God's answer to you today is, you can know. You can know that Jesus died for your sins. You can know that your sins are forgiven. You can know that you don't have to live in bondage.

You don't have to live with all the things that hold you back from the best life that God has for you.

You can simply confess your sin to God. You can believe that Jesus Christ died for your sins.

You can say, yes, I admit that I have a need. I admit that I am a sinner. I admit that I don't have the gift of eternal life, but God, I turn to you. I offer you my life.

[30 : 09] I ask you to cleanse me, and I thank and praise you for giving me the hope and the gift of eternal life. And you can enter into that joy and that freedom that Jesus Christ offers, that gift of eternal life that will not be taken from you.

You can thank him for that. Perhaps today you're living in that promised land. Perhaps today when you look at your life you say, yes, you know, I am living in the abundance of God's blessing. I walk in his presence. His word is alive to me, and I am just living in joy and in victory. If you are, praise God. That's a good place to be because your joy and your life with Christ will overflow and it will influence and impact other people's lives around you.

And that's a great blessed place to be. Perhaps you're living in that in-between place. What I'd say to you this morning if you are is don't believe the lie that God has abandoned you.

Don't believe the lie that God doesn't care. Put down your roots into God's word. Believe what he says when he says in Isaiah 30 verse 15, in repentance and rest is your salvation, in quietness and trust is your strength.

[31 : 31] Maybe you'll never see this side of eternity, what God's purpose is in leading you through that desert place, that wilderness place. But remind yourself that the God who loves you enough to give his only begotten son to die in your place has a good plan for you.

When I was a kid we used to sing a song together. In our family devotion time we sometimes ended by singing a little chorus together. We'd sing together, My Lord knows the way through the wilderness, all I have to do is follow, my Lord knows the way through the wilderness, all I have to do is follow.

Strength for today is mine all the way, and all that I need for tomorrow, my Lord knows the way through the wilderness, all I have to do is follow.

God bless you as you follow him.