

# Sunday 24th August 2025 - Weathering The Wilderness

*Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.*

Date: 24 August 2025

Preacher: Kim Thomas

[ 0 : 00 ] Today I'm going to talk about something that's been very close to my heart over the last few months. And I hope that I'm not, I just want to sort of start off by saying I'm not doing any of this for sympathy vote.

And I will say that a bit later on as well. I want to just share an experience with you all. Because I think in my heart, I think it might touch some people and they'll think, I'm doing that, I'm going through that as well.

Or I've been through that and wasn't it awful or whatever. So let's begin talking about what we're going to think about today. I hope that this summer has been good for you all.

I don't know about you, but do you like the heat waves? Do you love the heat waves? Yeah, there's some nods. There's a few people going, no, no, not me. No, Tom does. You like the sun, don't you, Tom?

You really do, yeah. And for me, it's been absolutely amazing. And the heat waves have been very, very good for me.

[ 1 : 04 ] Because it reminds me of the time I lived in Australia. And the summers from December to February were really, really hot where I lived. I will, there's Australia.

And they go, oh, no, it's Australia again. And I lived over on the left-hand side. I lived in Western Australia, where there's a red dot saying Perth.

And it's the most remote city in the world. That's its claim to fame. It's the most remote city in the world. And it was hot.

And Western Australia was particularly hot. But when you think about Australia, what a lot of people, when I say to them, when I tell you, when I say Australia, what do you think about? They go, hot, kangaroos, koalas, and desert.

They say desert. And lots of people say, oh, it's a really dry country. You know, it's all desert. But as you can see from this map, it's not all desert. Because people think it is one big desert with just cities.

[ 2 : 06 ] But as you can see, there's quite a lot of green areas there. And it isn't all desert. But there is a lot of desert in Australia, I have to say.

Because although there are plenty of green areas, the desert just does take up a proportion of the continent. Because it is a continent. It's not just a country.

It's a whole continent. And it's all relative. Because you see, the smallest desert on this map is called the Gibson Desert. It's on, again, the left-hand side towards the west.

And it's 60,230 square miles. So that's big. If you really want to put it into context about how big it is, how big this just one desert, the smallest desert in Australia is, it's 400 times bigger than the Isle of Wight.

And that's just one small desert. So, yeah, there are some deserts there. And there are some very, very big deserts. Now, in Western Australia, like I say, where I lived, there was a desert called the Pinnacles.

[ 3 : 18 ] And it was really, really odd. The Pinnacles were a very strange, surreal kind of desert. Oh, no, there's the Gibson Desert there.

Sorry, missed that one out. The Pinnacles, this is it. They just are there. They've just grown out of the ground. They're there. And it's natural limestone structures.

And they're just there. And it's really weird and odd when you go there. And lots of people go and visit it. And it's about 25,000 or 30,000 years old. So, it's been there a long time.

But there's nothing else. There is further on. The more you go, you can see in the background there, there's hills. And there's a bit of greenery. And then there's the sea on one side as well. But that's quite a long way away. And my grandson, George, my older grandson, who's now 12, he came to visit me when I lived out there.

[ 4 : 17 ] In 2019, he came out. And he was only six at the time. And when I asked him about what was the best bit about Australia, I thought he would say the kangaroos or the quokkas on Rocknest Island or anything like that.

Nah. He said the pinnacles. And there he is. There's George, six years old, at the pinnacles. And he said because they were just so odd. And it was just so empty and lonely and open there.

And at the time, we did think George had some neurodivergent issues. And he was diagnosed not long after he was autistic. But we weren't surprised. Because he, and this is the sort of place he really, really enjoyed.

And it made an impression on him. Because there was nothing else there other than these pinnacles, these limestone creations. Now, before you start thinking that this is going to be a travelogue on Australia and not really a sermon, I just want to say to you, this is, okay, that's it now. Because Matt said that we could talk about anything we wanted to. When I said to Matt, what do you want me to preach on in August? And he goes, whatever you like. You know, you go, you preach on whatever you want to.

[ 5 : 32 ] Preach on something you've preached on before or, you know, whatever. And I thought, ooh, good. Because the whole point of me showing you all these desert areas is to talk about wilderness.

Because that's what I want to talk about today. I want to talk about the wilderness. How empty sometimes the wilderness is. And how awful it feels at times.

So I'd like to address the question, what is a wilderness experience? A lot of Christians go through a wilderness experience. You might have had one yourself, which is why I say I wanted to talk about this.

Because some of you might think, yeah, that's happened to me. Or other people think, thank the Lord, that hasn't happened to me. So I want to talk about the wilderness.

And perhaps ask a question about why does it happen to Christians? Because the wilderness experience is not a good experience. Now, I know what the wilderness experience means to me.

[ 6 : 33 ] And I know that I'm not the only one who's gone through such an experience. And I asked that question. And comfortingly, the answer was, no, you're not the only one. Because I took to the internet and I had a look to see what a wilderness experience was.

As far as some Christians are concerned. And it's usually thought of as a tough time in which a believer endures discomfort and trials. The pleasant things of life are unable to be enjoyed.

Or they might be absent altogether. And one feels a lack of encouragement. A wilderness experience can involve a spiritual, financial, or emotional drought.

Having a wilderness experience is not necessarily a sign that a believer is sinning. Rather, it's a time of God-ordained testing. Now, that's just one definition of wilderness.

And there are some things that I really could do with picking out. But that was reassuring. To read that, I know that other Christians have been through experiences like this wilderness experience.

[ 7 : 41 ] But to be honest, I never thought that it was a punishment. You know, it talks there about, you know, it's not a sign that the believer is sinning. It's rather a time of God-ordained testing.

Well, do you know, that's the bit that needs another sermon to unpick. Because I'm sure we all believe in a God of love, a God of relationship, a God who is here with us.

And God-ordained testing, I think, needs a bit of extra thinking about. Maybe that will be another sermon, but not this one. But one of the things I want to tell you about wilderness experiences is they are hard.

They are hard. They are tough. There are times in life when you think, is the sun ever going to shine again? Despite the fact that, you know, it's been a blistering hot summer, you do think, is the sun ever going to shine again in my life?

You begin to wonder where God is in all of this, in everything that's going on. You start to question your purpose in life. And I can only say this with all authority, because this is what I've been through recently.

[ 8 : 51 ] And these are the feelings that I had. You start to question your purpose in life. You start to question God's plan for you. And sometimes even question the existence of God.

Although I have to say, I haven't. I haven't questioned the existence of God. I've sometimes questioned the existence of where do we go when we die.

But I haven't questioned the existence of God. Because of things that have happened in my life, throughout my life, and through the experiences I've had, I have that surety, that knowledge, that there is a God, and God is with us, and God is working in our lives.

So I just want to say that before you all start to think it's all going to be gloom and doom. But when you're in a wilderness experience, you can't feel the presence of God.

You don't seem to be able to feel the presence of God. You can't feel close to God. Maybe you've had experiences where you've felt God so close, where he's wrapped his arms around you.

[ 9 : 51 ] And when you're in a wilderness, you don't feel that. Prayer life is non-existent. And that's really hard as well.

If you've been somebody who's been used to praying and hearing from God and knowing God's presence in your prayer life, you can't even concentrate to pray.

And it's hard to focus on anything. The problem that surrounds you, it's all-encompassing. It drains you of your strength, of your spiritual strength, and your physical strength as well.

It's like being in a desert or a wilderness. Now, this isn't the first time I've been in this situation in my Christian life. Twice before, I've had the feeling like I'm in a wilderness.

But every single time, it's been different. The reason for it, obviously, is different. And the only thing that felt the same was wondering if God was there. Spoiler alert, yes, he is.

[ 10 : 50 ] The feeling of isolation and loneliness and aloneness is something I, as an extrovert, no, you never are an extrovert, as an extrovert, I find particularly difficult.

I really find that difficult. Now, there was a catalyst as to how I got to this place, got to be in this wilderness. And as I said before, I'm not telling you this story through any kind of sympathy.

I don't need sympathy. But it's an illustration of how circumstances that surround us can change our lives and can move things on.

So, in the past 12 months, I've been wrangling with a company that administers my pension. And they administer my pension on behalf of the people I worked for.

But due to my mistake on their part, they've overpaid me for quite a while. And when the mistake was discovered, they demanded that I pay back the overpayment.

[ 11 : 54 ] And I was unable to pay it back in one go. And they've not explained exactly how this mistake has occurred. But all I know, at my time of life, through no fault of my own, I retired in January.

I'm an old-age pensioner. At my time of life, having gone through some financial trials through my whole life because of being a single parent bringing up a child with no support, I have found myself in debt, which for me is awful.

And it's considerable debt. And it's of no fault of my own. No fault of my own. And their feeling, this company, their unfeeling attitude and their lack of communication has raised my anxiety levels beyond what I ever thought could happen.

So, do you know when we said about the definition of wilderness experience, it says, A wilderness experience can involve spiritual, financial or emotional drought.

Well, the financial drought then led me on to the spiritual and emotional drought. So, it all came together. And it's been very hard to deal with.

[ 13 : 17 ] It really has been difficult to deal with. Because it would have been bad enough if it had been my fault. But because it wasn't, and I thought I had everything planned out, beware of thinking you've got everything planned out.

This has happened. And, like I say, I'm not saying this for sympathy. I don't want any sympathy. I just want to tell you this is why. This is the catalyst that started it all.

And I tried to pray about the situation. Oh, my days, I tried to pray. I tried to pray, but my anxiety levels were really high. And when I did finally sort of think, right, I'm going to pray, I'm going to pray, I just couldn't.

My mind wouldn't be still. It couldn't be still for long enough. And that increased my sense of isolation and loneliness. To be honest, well, anyway, I couldn't concentrate for long enough to read the Bible.

Or anything that might help. Not knowing what I was going through, Gemma Wallace lent me a book that she'd read that was really, really good.

[ 14 : 28 ] And it was called Field Notes for the Wilderness. Do you know the great irony of that? I couldn't concentrate long enough to read it. It was probably, I've started to read it now, so you know that there is light at the end of this tunnel.

I asked to borrow it, but I just couldn't concentrate on it. And I was thinking, oh, my days, I've got this book that's going to help. It's Field Notes for the Wilderness. And Gemma said, oh, it's a really good book.

And she said to me not long ago, have you started that book yet? And I went, no, not yet. And I hadn't got the concentration to read it. And I'm only telling you this because some of you might be feeling like that.

Some of you feel, I must be praying about this situation. I must be reading things. I must read my Bible. And sometimes it's not possible because you're so overwhelmed by what's going on in your life.

But before you lose all hope in this story, I want to assure you of something. Like I said, I never stopped believing that God was there. I never stopped believing that.

[ 15 : 31 ] I never stopped believing that in that whole mess, God was there with me. With every twist and turn of this situation, things went from bad to worse.

And honestly, they did go from very bad to very worse. And I just knew God was there in the thick of it, supporting and holding me. You see, of all the things I thought I'd lost, his nail-scarred hands was never one of them.

Never one of those things that I thought I lost. How did I know? I just knew. I just knew. I just knew in my heart. I just knew. I think this is where faith comes in, doesn't it? Where, you know, you want to believe.

You know, I believe. Lord, forgive my unbelief. I clung to that promise that God has given to me and to you and to everyone that he'll never leave us or forsake us.

In all of life's ups and downs, God has always promised he will never leave us or forsake us. And I clung to that. In times past when I'd allowed myself to ask, are you real?

[ 16 : 40 ] Are you really there? Are you there? I'd never lost hope that God was there, even though I couldn't feel it. And for me, that's important. And I'm sure for many extroverts that's important, and maybe for some of you introverts as well, that you need to feel God there.

You know, we're human beings. We need to feel that we're in the presence of God. And I just couldn't feel that. I couldn't feel him anywhere. I couldn't.

I didn't know. But although I couldn't concentrate to read scripture, enough of it was embedded in my head and in my heart to know that this was truth, that God would never leave us or forsake us. And bits of scripture would pop up every now and then. And I thought, well, I can't read it, but I remember some of it. And I'm hopeless at remembering scripture. I really am, I have to say. But bits of it would pop up.

A coincidence? Incidents? No. A God incidence. God was telling me he was there. And it gave me inspiration. And also, things that had happened in the past.

[ 17 : 47 ] Things remembering. And remembering is so important. Remembering things that have happened in the past. How God has shown up. How God has been there. How God has been present.

In every situation. Remembering those times. Really, really helped. Really helped. Because you see, what I learned through the wilderness experience.

Is the absence of feeling God's presence doesn't mean he's not there. Just because you can't feel him doesn't mean he's not there. So, if you feel, if you can't feel his presence, he's still there.

If you can't feel God around, he's still there. In every situation, God is still there. And not just there, but active.

Active in your lives. Because that's what he promises. That's what he promises. Now, last week, we heard Dave speaking really well about DIY faith.

[ 18 : 48 ] And it reminded me of the multitude of people that I've spoken to. Who have a sort of pick and mix religion. Have you met them? You know, you've talked, oh, well, I like this bit. And you think, well, that's come from Buddhism.

And I like this bit. And that's come from Islam. And I like this bit. Or that's Christianity. And I like this bit. And whatever. And they pick out the bits that they really like of other people's faiths.

And then amalgamate it all together. And that's their faith. And they say, this is spiritual. I'm a spiritual person.

I don't go to church, but I'm spiritual. And there's nothing wrong with that. But that's what reminded me last week about Dave talking about DIY, do it yourself.

And I thought about these pick and mix people who have a spiritual understanding. But they're the people who, when things unravel, wonder why the universe doesn't step in to help.

[ 19 : 47 ] The universe doesn't step in to help because there's no personal relationship to hang on to. There's no deep bond of love to rely on, is there? The other thing that Dave did last week was he pinched my Bible reading clip.

But he didn't. We should have talked to each other about it, maybe. But I'm glad we didn't. Because for those of you who were here last week, this will be for me. Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, left the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil.

He ate nothing during those days, and at the end of them he was hungry. The devil said to him, If you are the Son of God, tell this stone to become bread.

Jesus answered, It is written, Man shall not live on bread alone. The devil led him up to a high place and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world.

And he said to him, I will give you all their authority and splendor. It has been given to me, and I can give it to anyone I want to.

[ 21 : 12 ] If you worship me, it will all be yours. Jesus answered, It is written, Worship the Lord your God and serve him only.

The devil led him to Jerusalem and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. If you are the Son of God, he said, throw yourself down from here.

For it is written, He will command his angels concerning you to guard you carefully. They will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.

Jesus answered, It is said, Do not put the Lord your God to the test. When the devil had finished all this tempting, he left him until an opportune time.

Last week, Dave was talking about temptation. This week, I'm talking about wilderness. But the same clip is really good for both. Do you know? Because Jesus, I think it's got one of the biggest understatements in the whole of the Bible in that passage.

[ 22 : 29 ] He hadn't eaten anything for 40 days, and he was hungry. I think that's the biggest understatement of all. If I haven't eaten anything for six hours, I am hungry. You know? And he was there in the wilderness.

What we experience in our lives, Jesus, the Son of God, part of the Holy Trinity, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, has experienced too.

God will not let us experience anything that he hasn't already experienced. You know? God came down to earth, and before his public ministry, and that's important to remember, before his public ministry, he was led out into a wilderness place where not only was he tempted, but he had nothing to do.

He had no iPad. He had no books. Not even the Bible. He had nothing. 40 days, which is an awful long time, 40 days in a place where there's nothing to do.

And I think I'd have gone mad by the end of 40 days with nothing to do. But what I want to say is whatever we might experience, Jesus has already experienced it.

[ 23 : 55 ] However we feel, Jesus has already felt it. And then he was going on to an amazing public ministry that led to his death.

And he knew all of that. Those 40 days were a time of gathering. Gathering together. Not only testing, but knowing and trusting in God.

Could you imagine when Jesus was being betrayed and led to the cross, could you imagine he thought, I know God is with me because this feels like the most awful time in my life.

However, I know, just like in the desert, God was with me. I believe that wilderness experiences can strengthen us and strengthen our faith and strengthen our resolve.

And boy, has it strengthened my resolve because I will not let this company get away with what they've got away with. And I know God is with me. I know God is there with me.

[ 25 : 07 ] Even in the place of isolation and weakness, Jesus knew, even in the place of being severely tested by the devil, even in that place, he knew that God was with him.

And that's the strength that we can get knowing that God is with us. Whatever happens. Whatever happens. Does this mean that my situation's fixed?

God, I wish it was. I'm still fighting the battle. But the difference is, I know who's fighting alongside me. Does it mean that everything will turn out right for me?

Nah, not at all. Because it might not. I might have to, I mean, I know I have to pay this money back, a huge amount of money. But I know that I have that peace in my heart of knowing that I'm not alone.

And I think it is that wilderness experience when there's been nothing else. There's been no being able to pray or read or anything. I think it's been that experience where God has been stronger because I've been weaker.

[ 26 : 15 ] So if you're going through a wilderness experience, I want you to just think, or when you do, sometimes, you know, it's not if, it's when.

I want you to know that this Jesus who has been through it himself, who loves you with more love than you can ever imagine.

And like I say, that experience that I've been through is not of my making, but it doesn't really matter. If it was of my making, if it was my own, if I'd have done this to myself, it wouldn't matter. Because Jesus, who is love, wants to be with us. He wants to walk beside us. Just like he knew the Father walking beside him in the wilderness.

But I have had a small breakthrough. And this is, again, not a coincidence, but a God incidence. And something's happened because God has inspired me to contact somebody who has helped me enormously.

[ 27 : 23 ] Now, it just popped into my head. Why don't you ring such and such? I didn't know this person, but why don't you ring the head of such and such? And it was from, it wasn't from this company.

It was from somewhere else. And what I didn't know, and I had no idea of knowing, was the person who I contact, this person who just popped into my head, not only had the direct number of the manager of the person who wasn't getting back to me, who wasn't communicating with me, but, yeah, but also the direct number of the CEO of that company, of that troublesome company who weren't getting back to me.

I didn't know that this woman had the number of not only the manager, but also of the CEO of the company. How would I know? God knew. God knew.

And it's those little nuggets that give me inspiration because it didn't, it didn't stop the situation still being bad, but it just reminded me of who was in my corner, you know?

And it's about, even when you don't think you can listen to God, something will pop into your head and so you test it and then you think, oh, that wasn't me, that was definitely God.

[ 28 : 39 ] And I just want to encourage you with that as well because it is really encouraging. And I want to repeat what I said before. Just because you can't feel that God is there doesn't mean to say he isn't.

Just because you can't feel it doesn't mean to say he's not there. He is. If you can't pray, we know that Jesus is praying for us. He's interceding for us.

If we can't read, we must trust his promises. We must hold firm to the faith that we've got even when we don't feel like we want to. Just imagine Jesus in the desert and the devil saying to him, you're really hungry, mate.

Why don't you just make these rocks into bread? Go on. It'll be fine. It'll be fine. And, do you know, it's just that, no, no, I've got to be strong.

I've got to hang on to the word of God. I've got to hang on to the promises of God. I've got to hang on to that faith that we have. And in a world that we live in, like just today, the news is saying, oh, look, somebody else from the Church of England is now being investigated for some awful things they've done.

[ 29 : 53 ] And you just think, oh, the poor church, you know, how much more battering can it take? It will take battering from the world. It will take battering from the devil. It will have people within the church who are not followers of Jesus, although they say they are.

And they will do things for their own ends, although they say they don't. But God is the one that's in control and we have to have faith in that.

And another God incident, I'm nearly finished now. I'm nearly finished. you know, I said that Dave used the scripture that I'd chosen last week and I thought, well, never mind, I'll still carry it on. Two weeks prior to that, Hazel also put up a piece of scripture that she got from her friend in Kenya and I was going to use that. So I'm using it again because it speaks into what Hazel was saying. Last week's scripture spoke into what Dave was saying. This week's scriptures are still relevant to what I'm going to say. Rejoice in the Lord always, even, these are my words, even if it feels really hard to rejoice.

[ 31 : 04 ] rejoice in the Lord always and I'll say it again, rejoice. Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Remember that. They might not feel it.

Do not be anxious about anything. That's easier said than done. But in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your request to God and the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Now, tell me that God doesn't work in situations where two pieces of scripture that I was going to use have been used to talk to us as God's community over the last few weeks.

God is saying, trust me. God is saying, believe in me, even when it's hard to, even when you find you're in a wilderness. God is saying, please trust in the Lord.

Trust in him and he will be there and he will give you. I have peace in my heart over this whole situation. It might not work out how I want it to, but I have peace in my heart to know that God is with me.

[ 32 : 19 ] I might not be able to pray. It's getting better, I have to say. It's getting better. I might not be able to pray and I might not be able to read scripture, but I can say thank you.

Do you know, I can say thank you to God. Thank you that you're there every single moment of my life, whatever I'm going through. So you'll be glad to hear I finished, but I finished because the story still goes on.

There might be some of you here who feel, have felt, are feeling, might feel the way I feel. I just want to give you hope. I just want to say when you feel God isn't near, he's using me to speak to you.

You know, recognise it, recognise that God wants a relationship with every one of us. It's not about the universe. It's about a close and personal God who speaks into our hearts and our minds and even when we're not listening, he still speaks into our ears.

So please don't lose hope. Please don't think that God is not there because he is in every situation. Amen.

[ 33 : 35 ] Amen. Amen.