

A Vast Wilderness

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[0 : 00] I have a short commercial today. My son is a sculptor by the name of David Robinson, and he's having a show next week, and this is the invitation to the show.

And so if any of you are interested in going, please help yourself. I, uh, he's really good. He's able to say things and leave them right there in front of you for the rest of your life. I just say things, and they go like bubbles in the air. So I'm, uh, and he's, uh, he seems to be able to say things in his work that, uh, that I just struggle with and never seem to be able to get right. So, help yourself. The, uh, had a bad time in Ontario last week in one sense. They were all such good people.

And, uh, you know, farmers of southern Ontario who had, uh, been on their farms for three and four generations and had come over and lived there.

[1 : 26] And, and, uh, they would, I had sort of coffee parties. I went around to their houses and talked to them, and one fellow would get up and say, I live by the Ten Commandments, and I expect other people do.

Anything else doesn't matter. Now, that's a very difficult conversation starter. I mean, that's, uh, it proves, first of all, you haven't read the New Testament.

But, uh, then it, it's, uh, it's very difficult. And, of course, there was a, there was a wonderful and pernicious lady there who insisted that what should happen at church every Sunday is that the Ten Commandments should be read loud and clear and then people sent home.

And, uh, that, that would do it. Well, that's hard to break through that because they, they haven't just picked that up recently. They've been going at it for a long time.

This passage of Scripture with which I've, uh, had to live in preparation for this moment, which, uh, yeah, which I enjoy.

[2 : 41] I mean, I enjoy coming here on Wednesdays, but I have this terrible conscience about it, you know, that what I should do is go off and spend a day somewhere on the other side of the lions or something in meditation, uh, because, uh, I, I, the thing that I've come to in my old age about this business of preaching is that a lot of people use you to confirm their personal illusions.

That's what they use preachers for. And, uh, you're a good preacher if you do it and a bad one if you don't. And, uh, it's, uh, it's difficult because, uh, I realize that I have illusions about myself which, uh, you help, you help to confirm.

And so, uh, you do the same rotten job I do. Uh, helping me to maintain illusions. It's, it's very difficult to come to, uh, to the heart of this passage of Scripture.

Look at it and you'll see what I mean because right there in the middle, four lines from the top and five lines from the bottom, six lines from the bottom, to know what was in your heart.

That, uh, put a, put a circle around it because that's what, uh, that's what it's about. It's, it's about knowing what is in your heart.

[4 : 23] And, uh, the, uh, the difficulty with that is, uh, that we, first off, don't really know what's in our hearts.

Secondly, we don't want to know what's in our hearts. And thirdly, we suspect if we did know, we would be destroyed because your heart has a way of speaking to you at certain moments in your life and, uh, giving you the terrible awareness that, uh, there's nothing there.

There isn't any, there isn't any meaning to your life. And, uh, those moments are not, uh, are not great moments. They're just, uh, suddenly when you're busy cleaning your teeth in the morning or something, you think, what's this all about?

And then you rush on because you don't want to answer that question. You know, you have this sort of intimation of the meaninglessness of your own life. So it's hard to know what's in your heart.

We're engaged in this wonderful exercise of a general election next Monday. And, uh, on that day, there will be revealed to this country what lies at the heart of this country.

[5 : 49] Confusion, you know, that's, uh, it's, uh, it's, it's very, it's disconcerting. It's disconcerting for me to think that all that money is being spent to get me to vote for somebody.

And I, I don't know who to vote for. I, I, I don't tell anybody about this, but I, but it's, it's very, very confusing, very hard.

First, to think that it ultimately matters who you vote for in the first place. I mean, it, it's a kind of throwaway gesture.

In a way, it's hard to think through and to, to do something. And then to think that what you've done has any ultimate significance when the, when, you know, when the, when the statistics start to roll in and, and, uh, make your little decision that you made and marked with the next count for something.

It's, uh, it's hard. It's hard, you know, to think that what we will be watching on television next Monday night reveals the heart of what's the, of what this country is all about.

[7 : 04] I just don't know whether that process can do it. Whether, you know, whether, whether there's gotta be something deeper than that.

There's gotta be something deeper than the kind of, uh, arithmetic that's involved in, in counting ballots from everybody across the country.

To get to know what's at the heart of a country and to get to know what's at the heart of an individual is, uh, is very difficult stuff.

But look at this passage and I want you to look at it carefully. There are five verses in it and, uh, I wish you had time to do this, but you haven't.

These are the five words, uh, that come out. Obey is, is the first verse. Uh, the second verse is remember, uh, look at it and you can, it doesn't say it, but there it is.

[8 : 08] You have to remember to obey and to remember. The third is to be humbled. That's not something you do, but something that's done to you. And the fourth is, uh, sustained.

Uh, and this again is something that happens to you. And the fifth is discipline, or, uh, which is, of course, the hidden word is disciple.

There it is. So those five words and those five verses I want to put in front of you. You are to obey because this is the only way that you will live, enter, and possess the land which was promised on oath to your forefathers.

Uh, but you see, it's a radical kind of statement. Radical in terms of the self-understanding of our civilization and our culture, which means that anything that you can see that is institutionalized, anything that's structured, you deconstruct, you de-institutionalize, you spontaneously burst out on the world and do anything but obey.

And yet the implication of this is that the meaning of your existence is to be found in obeying. Very hard for us to come to that place where we are prepared to obey.

[9 : 45] It's, uh, it's the Lord whom we are to obey. Uh, and, uh, the second, the second verse says we are to remember.

And, uh, which means ultimately you, uh, you, uh, you've got to live with history.

You can't escape from it. You know, I mean, I, I, one of the, one of the things that I think the church gets into a lot of trouble doing this these days is trying to escape from its own history.

It's trying to think that you can put together a spontaneous congregation of people who don't have to be responsible for 2,000 years of church history.

They can be what has never been before. And, uh, they don't have to take responsibility for, for, uh, history. But it says you do have to.

[10 : 48] You have to remember. You have to remember the Lord your God. which means the God whose name is the Lord.

I'm going to need a glass of water or somebody. Can you help me, uh, Ian? Hi. Uh, you've got to remember him because he is the one who led you.

He is the one who will test you. He is the one you need to know. He is the one who has humbled you. Thanks, Ian. And, uh, so, you're to remember the Lord.

Then, you are to be humbled. You see, that's what, uh, that's the third verse. And it, and it's built on this word being, being humble. Uh, T.S. Eliot said humility is endless.

And somebody commentating on that said, uh, it runs infinitely deeper and so, uh, uh, requires infinitely more courage than the most, uh, well, the most profound despair.

[12:07] Most people think that what, what, what happens to us in life is, uh, is a, uh, sinking ultimately into despair from which we can't escape.

but what this says is, no, it's not sinking into despair. It's worse than that. It's being humbled. Being humbled to the place where you recognize that you are not in control.

And, uh, and, you know, for people who, whose business it is to be in control, who think in terms of being in control. Uh, he is, God's purpose is to, is to humble you.

And he does this by hunger. I mean, uh, inability to provide for yourself. Uh, he feeds you with stuff that you don't know anything about, which is called manna.

It teaches, uh, it teaches you to break your dependency on bread, you know, because our dependency on bread is what we're all involved in.

[13:20] Man shall live by bread alone. You keep bread in the cycle, and life goes on and on and on, except that your dependency upon it, you are to be humbled by that dependency being broken.

So that if you're depending on bread, God wants to teach you not to live by that dependency. Uh, you, you have to, uh, you, you have to recognize that you have nothing, and, uh, and ultimately that you need nothing.

You know, it's, uh, the, the, the, the focus of this humbling experience that God wants to subject you to is to bring you to the place where you recognize that the only thing you have is God's love for you in your nothingness.

Now, that's, uh, I think that's a very hard place for us to come to. But, just historically, it's a, it's a place that we all in a sense understand.

Do you know that back in the Middle Ages, I don't know when, somewhere back in history, they had what they called the Desert Fathers who took this kind of thing seriously and went out and found a cave in the desert somewhere in, in, uh, in the Middle East and they lived the rest of their lives there in dependence upon the provision that God made in order that they would know how totally nothing they were, you know, so that they would understand the, the infinite mercy of God in loving them and, uh, providing for them.

[15:19] it's this, it's this business that is, is kind of inescapably, I think, at the heart of human experience and it was this, for this reason that these verses that you have in front of you were written to help you to understand because the Lord knew that when these people whom Moses was talking to on the borders of the promised land that when they got in to the land that was flowing with milk and honey with grapes and pomegranates and all the luxury of a materialistic society, they would forget their dependence upon God and the thing that would do them more damage than physical hunger was to forget that dependence upon God and so he, he had to humble them, he had to bring them to the point where he knew what was in their hearts.

Well now, God presumably does know what's in our hearts but the difficulty is he wants us to come to know what's in our hearts. What sense of despair is there?

What we're hiding from? Why we create all our illusions? Why we indulge in our idolatry? Why we keep ourselves busy? Why we can't turn off the radio or the television?

Because of the sudden descent upon us of the nothingness of the meaning of our own existence.

That's, do you know what they have to do back east to watch out the World Series?

They have to stay up till one o'clock in the morning. You can see how much better designed Vancouver is. But by the time you have given yourself heart and soul to three hours of gripping drama interspersed with a million commercials, it's suddenly the thing goes off and there's nothing there.

[17:30] I mean, that's you, I mean. You are the nothing that's there. You've been robbed of everything and only your identification with this great titanic struggle between good and bad, between red and blue.

That's the only thing in which you find meaning. And, so that, that you get, you get this sort of thing that, that God is desperately concerned for us to humble us so that, so that we recognize that at the heart of human existence is not the case for despair, but the recognition of love.

When you come right down to it, you know that you are loved. and you can only discover that under, under the circumstances in which God works with you as it says here that you're to remember that he wants to humble you and to test you in order to know what is in your heart, in order for you to

know what's in your heart.

You know, and, and that, and that sense that when you come right down to it, there is, there is the knowledge of your nothingness, your meaninglessness as a person that God has reached out and touched by saying, by, by, uh, conferring his love on us.

What has God loved? He has loved me. What am I? Nothing. Except that God loves me. And that that kind of basic understanding is, is what he wants us to, to know.

[19 : 20] And he says, uh, that that's, that's why he went, took us through the process. Then it talks about sustaining us. Your clothes did not wear out.

Your feet did not swell during these 40 years. Remember, uh, part of the pattern of our life is he breaks the, he breaks the dependence upon bread.

Then he breaks our dependence upon clothes. Remember that, don't be anxious what you will wear or what you put on for consider the lilies of the field. Christ recognized this consuming human anxiety about our apparel.

And he, and, uh, that was a matter of some indifference to them in the wilderness because, uh, their clothes did not wear out in the wilderness. Uh, we are anxious about whether we can keep going or not.

And God was able to keep them going for 40 years without their feet swelling. And in, in, in verse 5 it says, uh, know then in your heart that as a man disciplines his son, so the Lord God disciplines you.

[20 : 31] And that this is, this is, this is at the heart of, of the passage that God disciplines us, uh, and that, uh, all this process of, uh, exposing us to hunger, to dependence upon that which we don't know, to breaking the cycle of our dependence upon bread, to having nothing, but finding we need nothing more, uh, that, that, that eagerness to, to, to find that place.

And so, God does that in order that you might recognize that, uh, that what he wants at the heart of your life is a sense of being disciplined or of being a disciple that you are believing in and trusting in him at the level of your heart.

Uh, this morning at breakfast, uh, one of the men, his son had been lost up in the mountains in Squamish overnight and, uh, somebody said, what did your son learn?

He's 17 years old. He says, he learned there is another reality. You know, a wonderful experience and, uh, and this, of course, is, is why this wilderness experience is essential to us in order to learn that there is another reality.

And you see, it's not really surprising that at the beginning of his ministry, Christ spends 40 days in the wilderness facing the particular and peculiar temptations that are common to us all in order that he might encounter this, the, the reality of the God who loved him and sustained him and kept him.

[22 : 37] And so what it does is it turns our life upside down so that we, uh, we discover and, we discover the, the, the fact that it's, uh, it's in the moment of our suffering.

It's in the moment of our nothingness. It's in the moment when we suspect that despair is going to take over that we discover the reality of God.

And that's what our life is all about. And, uh, and it's, it's that that we, we need somehow to know and to understand.

And, we, we tend to think if I lost this or if I lost this or if I lost this or if I lost this or if I lost this. And I, I hesitate to put names on those things.

So fearful is the contemplation of the loss of things that are near and dear and terribly important to us. And yet what this passage is saying to us is in the experience of the loss of this and this and this and this and this and then your health your control you would then make the discovery of what is in your heart.

[24 : 10] Then God would know what is in your heart and you would know what is in your heart. I mean it's a magnificent story of this girl without hands or feet in the province this morning.

I don't know whether you, but she's a terrific person who having nothing that we consider essential to our lives has done everything that most of us have never done.

Because somehow in the discovery of our nothingness, there is what God wants us to discover is the reality of his relationship to us and his commitment to us.

And that that's what we have to discover. And that's why you have to go into the wilderness to discover it. And if you won't go there, you sometimes need to be led into that wilderness to make that discovery.

And so you see that the kind of pinnacle of, I mean, I say it, somebody has described it as the way up.

[25 : 25] But when you reach the pinnacle, you are at the bottom, if you know what I mean, that you have come to the end of yourself and discovered that at the end of yourself is the beginning of God, the necessity for the worship of God, a life that is reckoned to be meaningless apart from your obedience to God, your continual remembrance of him in history, the necessity that he has to humble you in order that you will learn to trust him, and that he will sustain you, and that he ultimately, with the care of a loving father, wants to disciple you, so that at the heart there is that obedience.

And the crown, in a sense, is expressed, I think, by Jesus Christ on the cross.

When he, from the cross, having been humbled, totally, naked and nailed to a cross, he cries out, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

And I guess in that cry, the sum total of our humanity is, I mean, it's articulated for us. And the cry of our own hearts is articulated for us.

And in that moment of saying, as we look at our lives and confess the fear of despair and the reality of the nothingness in terms of the meaning of our life, that we discover the reality of God's love.

[27 : 22] And that Christ, in a sense, led us to that place so that we would be familiar with it and that we wouldn't be afraid of it, that we would know that that is the place where he wants us to be, the place of obedience, the place where we don't forget, the place where we accept his humbling of us, the necessity of his sustaining us, and the desire he has that we should be his disciples, living in the obedience of faith.

right down to the thoughts and imaginations of our hearts. Let me pray. Our God, it's not hard to wonder whether those those people of the ancient world that were gathered on the banks of the Jordan, ready to cross into the promised land, knew what you were saying to them.

And it's not certain we know what you're saying in all that it means. But the example that they have left us is to remind us of who you are and that you have the right to command our obedience, that we have the responsibility of remembering, that you in your grace humble us, that we are reminded that you have sustained us, and that you want to take each one of us, and with a peculiar honoring of the individuality and uniqueness of each of our personalities, you want to disciple us, that we may know you, and love you, and serve you with all our hearts, that we might be brought to the place where humanly we cry, as Jesus in his humanity cried, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

and in that moment to discover that you haven't. Grant that this paradox may come together in each of our lives.

We ask in Jesus' name. Amen.