

THE FOUR PHASES OF THE WILDERNESS

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In this...article, I would like to show you that periods of involuntary isolation are usually divided into four stages. It can be helpful to precisely identify them, so that we have hope and perspective of what we should feel and do.

Stripping and Breaking

We are typically led into desert times by surprise, or by...progressive shocks that get us deeper and deeper down into what seems like "the valley of the shadow of death". Positions, possessions or securities are usually lost in a way that we never expected, such that shame, anger and confusion are feelings which are not uncommon at this early stage. There can be various painful means that force us to enter desert times: a severe sickness... the loss of someone or a secure job, or even persecution...

One way that makes it particularly painful and confusing is after we did something righteous, we end up being treated unfairly. For instance we wanted to improve things within our church, our job or our family, and we end up being criticized, misunderstood or even rejected. Moses, for example, tried to do something for God and he got "rewarded" with the unfair treatment of being led into a long desert time. The same happened to Elijah after he spoke to Ahab, as well as Joseph when he shared his dream.

Struggling to Find God and Ourselves

The second phase determines whether we simply have a life crisis that will eventually pass, or we have entered a desert time.

The way to find out is through the following 3 signs:

1. The first one is that after spending enough time to forcefully change our situation, with every possible wisdom and discipline, we eventually realize that we are "stuck". Nothing has really changed, and we have absolutely no perspective of when it will ever finish. We have been put aside, isolated,

most people cannot really relate to what is happening to us, and our professional situation is definitively not what we had chosen. Worse, we start to have this nagging feeling that God Himself had a plan to bring us into this dry and isolate place where no one will want to join us (isn't that what deserts are?). As it is written: "the Spirit led Jesus into the desert" (Matt. 4:1).

2. The second sign of a desert is that we are being tested in how we see ourselves. For instance, the three times that Jesus was tempted in the desert always had to do with his identity ("if you are truly the Son of God..."). The reason that we go through an identity crisis is that before we entered our desert time, our whole person was tied and shaped by an environment and responsibility; once those have been removed, we have a hard time to know who we are.
3. The third and most evident characteristic that we have entered a desert time is the confusing feeling that God is somehow silent. He does not seem to hear our prayers, and worse, we cannot really recognize His familiar voice. In the worst cases, some Christians start to even battle with the emotions of loneliness, depression and "spiritual cynicism" that are so very precisely described in the third chapter of Lamentations:

"I am the man who has seen affliction by the rod of his wrath. God has driven me away and made me walk in darkness rather than light; indeed, he has turned his hand against me again and again, all day long. He has made my skin and my flesh grow old and has broken my bones. He has besieged me and surrounded me with bitterness and hardship. He has made me dwell in darkness like those long dead. He has walled me in so I cannot escape; he has weighed me down with chains. Even when I call out or cry for help, he shuts out my prayer. He has barred my way with blocks of stone; he has made my paths crooked. Like a bear lying in wait, like a lion in hiding, he dragged me from the path and mangled me and left me without help. He drew his bow and made me the target for his arrows. He pierced my heart with arrows from his quiver. I became the laughingstock of all my people; they mock me in song all day long. He has filled me with bitter herbs and sated me with gall. He has broken my teeth with gravel; he has trampled me in the dust. I have been deprived of peace; I have forgotten what prosperity is. So I say, "My splendor is gone and all that I had hoped from the Lord." I remember my affliction and my wandering, the bitterness and the gall. I well remember them, and my soul is downcast within me."

Of course, the primary reason that we cannot HEAR God is that we cannot SEE ourselves clearly. Since we do not know any more who we really are, we cannot hear God in the same way as before, such that He seems to be silent. In other words, because our identity is being changed, so is the way in which we perceive God.

During that confusing period, many Christians are forced to ask themselves: "What has God really created me for? Who am I now that no one recognizes me any more for what I used to be?" In essence, we struggle with the following question: "Who am I now that I have no past and no future, and how much God means to me in all this?"

Finding Genuine Intimacy and Peace with God

There comes a point when eventually our mourning and bitterness must cease. We can either keep on with the depressive feelings of the second phase, or we can cry out to God until we find enduring peace and real intimacy with Him. We cannot remove ourselves from the desert, but we can choose our attitude in it. This, in turn, determines how long we will stay in it. For instance, most Israelites were meant to go through a short time of wilderness after Egypt, but because they chose idolatry, bitterness and unbelief, their desert became a long process of 40 years and most of them never entered the Promised Land. Deserts are not meant to kill us spiritually, but to prepare us for a better stage in life. They cannot be shortened, but our attitude can make them longer.

This is when we must choose to seek God with a different attitude. This is the kind of situation where we have absolutely no other choice. Either God is nowhere, or God is now here! We desperately need God, and a quick fix through Him will not do it. However long it may take, we must press on through surrender, prayer, worship, fasting or whatever "breakthrough" that works for us, until we finally start to perceive His voice and find real peace. Now, it is very important that if we are going to seek God, we seek him with the right motivations. Often, even unconsciously, we pursue Him for the following two wrong reasons:

1. The first wrong motivation is to seek Him so that He gives us a precise plan of action of what to do for Him. The reason is that unconsciously we want

to do something so as to redefine our lost identity. In itself there is nothing wrong to build our self-esteem through some activity, but there is a danger that we miss the whole point of the desert. During such times God wants us to slow down, take a lot of time in prayer and discover who we really are as we discover who He really is. At this point in our lives, our being matters more than all our doing. God wants to transform the way we see ourselves through Him. He does this by revealing all the prideful and egocentric motivations we had in our "former life", to show us that He does not see us through our jobs, our positions or even through all the people we loved. In the desert, God does not see us as "the prince of Egypt", as "the preferred son of Jacob", or as "the prophet of Israel". He sees us as we really are - sinners who do not need to prove ourselves to Him or to others.

At the same time, we are not just sinners, but dearly beloved children of His, who have a priceless value to Him. The more we understand this paradox of our identity, the deeper we are being transformed. It is precisely because in desert we have nothing to show for ourselves that we can understand our true value before God. It is a time when our self-esteem cannot be defined by our accomplishments, and therefore we must find it in our intimacy with God.

2. The second wrong motivation we have in seeking God may be the fact that we seek more temporal and earthly answers than God Himself. Unconsciously, we seek Him to get back the job, the house, the mate, the ministry or the situation that we have lost.

Now, there is nothing wrong with seeking such blessings, but there is always a danger that they become more important than God Himself. Idolatry is never a danger with bad things, but with good ones. We get so much blessed by God that we forget Him and become self-centered and self-deceived. Desert times are meant to bring us back to seek God just for Himself, beyond all that He can give us: the Giver is more important than all His gifts.

When a human being has reached the point that God's presence matters more than all other blessings, pleasure and securities in this life, then such a person is truly blessed. This is why Christians who have endured long

times of prison with God usually come out with an authority, a peace and a love that cannot be explained in human terms. This is why God allows even his best people to be thrown in prisons. From time to time the reset button of isolation-desert times needs to be pushed, so that we see life through the Giver rather than through His gifts.

The most obvious sign that we are "successfully" going through the third stage is the sense of peace and surrender that characterizes us. If we can genuinely say to God: "however long you want me to stay in that unchangeable situation, I trust you and praise you for this, because your presence matters more than anything else in my life", then peace will certainly rule in our hearts.

Another sign is that we become transparent and humble. We do not have any more to prove ourselves to anyone.

Another encouraging sign is the miraculous favor of God for our physical needs as we learn to supernaturally depend on God. For instance, Jesus was served by the angels and Elijah was fed by the ravens.

Directly related to this is the ability to walk in the supernatural. Joseph became an expert at giving interpretation of dreams, Moses had his burning bush experience and miraculous signs, and Elijah was raising the dead and multiplying flour and oil.

Seeing the Light at the End of the Tunnel and Patiently Exiting

At the beginning of this final stage, God usually gives us some signs in advance that our situation will end, in order to encourage us. It can be a supernatural revelation, a dream or an intuition that shows us that things will take a different turn, or it can be through people or conditions that give us a clear confirmation of what is already in our hearts. Usually, if we have fully surrendered and not put false hopes in people or circumstances (as we used to do in the early stages of our desert times), then we can recognize God's voice for ourselves. It is very important in this final phase that we keep on with the same attitude of trust and peace that we had in the third stage, by not forcing out the final outcome. Often, when we see the light at the end of the tunnel, we can be tempted to speed up the final process, instead of having the patience to wait on God. He has the

perfect timing, and sometimes this final stage of the whole process may take longer than we hoped.

The reason we do not have to speed up things is that desert times usually finish with dramatic turn-around: After 14 years the slave Joseph becomes prime minister overnight; after 40 years the long forgotten Moses suddenly comes back and within days two nations are completely shaken; after 3-4 years Elijah radically revolutionizes everything in one day at Mt Carmel; after 30 years, Jesus, who is not known before, ends up his desert and starts his ministry with a spectacular demonstration of miraculous power.

God may keep us a long time in the waiting, but when He moves, it is fast and with power!

The way I described each sequence may not be as "extreme" for some of us, but they still include the following characteristics:

Summary of the 4 phases:

In the first phase, we are progressively or suddenly being removed from our secure environment and role.

This leads us in the second phase in which we experience some "dark night of the soul" as we struggle to find God and our real identity through Him.

The third phase begins by a desperate seeking of God until we finally find surrender, peace and genuine intimacy with God.

In the final stage, we receive early on encouraging signs that the whole process of isolation will eventually finish.