

THE WILDERNESS

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The journey of faith, if it is authentic, will inevitably take you to the wilderness. Preachers have preached about this. Songs and hymns have been written about it. Those who have traveled any time at all in their journey with Christ recognize this place. It is a place that you would prefer to avoid. To those who are truly called of Christ, however, the wilderness is unavoidable. Not even Jesus was exempt from it. This wilderness is a lonely place—a place of separation from friends and loved ones. This separation may not be a physical separation, but you recognize that you do not have the basis for companionship that you once had. This is a place of being misunderstood, and sometimes even being persecuted. Much of the time there is no *feeling* of being spiritual here. In fact, you probably *felt* much closer to God while you were being entertained by the praise bands and ear-tickling words of the preachers in the fellowships that you attended before being called out to this wilderness. You may sometimes even wonder if you have backslidden or made a misstep along the way because God seems so distant.

You haven't. God wants you to know, in fact, that through the most bewildering times, the most challenging times, the most discouraging times—you are being faithful to Him. You have been bonded to Him so strongly, that *nothing* can separate you from the love of God—not even the feelings of alienation from Him. And friends, the good news is that despite how it feels, this is a time when God is doing His deepest work in you. He is rejoicing at the simple fact that you are continuing to put one foot in front of the other, not understanding why, not even seeing clearly the purpose to which you have been called. More than any other time in your journey, you are truly walking by *faith* while in the wilderness, not by sight, and you need to know that this pleases the heart of God more than you can imagine!

You need to know also that while you are indeed going through this journey alone in terms of *your* experience, you are not alone. Countless others are in the same fix that you are in. This is an experience that is shared by all who have ever taken this journey of faith. We will be examining three related wilderness journeys in scripture that foreshadow the wilderness journey that God has in store for all of us. We will examine, first, the 40 days of testing that Jesus experienced after His baptism by John. Following this, we will look briefly at the 40-year wilderness through which the Lord took Moses as He prepared him to lead the children of Israel out of Egypt. This, in turn, prompted another wilderness journey for the entire nation of Israel as they wandered another 40 years before entering the Promised Land. We will examine this journey extensively as it parallels so much of what God's people today face on their wilderness journey.

The number 40 is both fascinating and significant. In addition to these occurrences, we also observe that after the children of Israel entered the wilderness, Moses spent 40 days atop Mt. Sinai without food or water waiting upon the Lord to write upon the tablets the second time. We also note that during the 40-year wilderness sojourn 12 men were sent out to spy out the Promised Land for 40 days. Elsewhere, we see Noah and his family shut up in the ark for 40

days while God sent a flood to kill every living thing which was not contained in the ark. The prophet Ezekiel lay on his side 40 days for Israel's sins. These are but a few of the many instances of the number 40 in scripture. This number is seen so many times in scripture and it is almost always used in connection with experiences or events that involve testing and trial or cleansing and purging. I think we can say, as most biblical scholars do, that this number is symbolic of testing and/or cleansing when it is found in scripture. Indeed, this is the purpose of the wilderness experience!

We have learned to read the stories in scripture as historical accounts of the dealings of God with His people. They are much more than this. They are natural, historical events which represent, as shadows and types, spiritual realities that all of God's people must experience if they are to reach that place in the Spirit to which we are destined. And so, we approach Jesus' time in the wilderness, and the wilderness experiences of the ancient Hebrews as a "picture" of the journey that we are on. There is a spiritual counterpart in our wilderness experience for the historical events and challenges that faced God's people so long ago. Let us reflect on these experiences, with eyes of the Spirit, so that we can gain greater appreciation and understanding of that which we are experiencing.

JESUS IS TEMPTED OF THE DEVIL FORTY DAYS

We would do well to first take note that immediately after Jesus was baptized by John, and the Holy Spirit announced His Sonship, Jesus was *led by the Spirit* into the wilderness for at least 40 days. This was not a foray into the wilderness because of some misstep on Jesus' part. The Spirit of God Himself took Him there. Jesus knew that this was the time of testing that we all would face on our journey of obedience to Him. As the Pattern Son, Jesus understood that He must go before us and experience the testing and refining process that we would all eventually face.

Jesus experienced great hunger during these forty days, for scripture tells us that he fasted this entire time. Not surprisingly, the offer of food is the first temptation that Satan brought to him: *"If you are the son of God, command these stones become bread."* As we shall see below, the longing to fill their hunger was one of the first temptations that the children of Israel faced when they were taken into the wilderness. If these experiences are a picture of the wilderness in store for us, it would benefit us to reflect upon this further.

Both in my own experience, and in the experiences that I have observed of others, one of the first complaints of the wilderness sojourner is spiritual hunger. We long to go back to the fleshpots of Egypt where, despite the fact that we were in bondage, we felt "full." We could count on the routines that organized Christianity could offer. We could depend on a pastor to "feed" us, in addition to the steady diet of praise and worship, and even the observation of signs and wonders that gave us the sense of being "fed." The problem is, we needed another "meal" within days and we were once again dependent upon the rulers of this Babylonian system to feed us once again. Our life in Egypt under the pharaohs of organized religion was much more akin to a narcotics addict needing his next fix than it was to truly being fed of the Spirit of God. Jesus said that whoever ate of the bread that he had to offer would *never* hunger again.

Surely, this is a different kind of food than that of which we partook in our former way of religiosity.

Jesus told the tempter that man must live by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God. This Word (capital W) is living and comes from the mouth of God which includes all those men and women who live by this Word and speak it. The wilderness is designed to teach us to feed on the bread of life which is the very Word of God that we speak by the power of the Holy Spirit.

The wilderness is designed to wean us from the bread made from stones. We will go through periods of intense loneliness, and hunger for the fellowship and soulful satisfaction that the organized church provided us. Gone are the Sunday school classes, the feel-good worship services, the potluck suppers and the powerful oratory to stimulate our minds. Tragically, countless sojourners succumb to the lure of the harlot. These have not counted the cost. They were not prepared for hunger pangs. They do not fully understand what is going on with them in this desolate place, and give in to the pressure to come back to the system of bondage that they left, believing that they were mistaken in taking this sojourn out of Egypt. Oh, if they could only understand that the hunger they are experiencing is part of the plan of God for them, to refine them and make them wholly dependent upon Him as their Bread that will leave them perfectly fed spiritually!

Jesus was then tempted to throw himself down from the temple because if he truly was the Son of God, the angels would bear Him up and would protect Him from bodily harm. Jesus responded from scripture that "Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God." How often do we "tempt" God while in the wilderness? We become discouraged by our circumstances. Life does not seem to be going our way. Perhaps the bottom falls out of our finances or our health. Our friends keep their distance. We begin to complain, "Why did the Lord allow this to happen?" "He could have stopped this and He didn't." "What kind of a God are you anyway!" The good news, friend, is that our Heavenly Father is not taken aback by our tempting Him. He does not patronize us by giving in to our childish demands or temper tantrums. Neither does He leave us or forsake us. He is there, even when we have no awareness of His presence. In fact, this is often a time when he *cannot* make His presence be known to us if He is to accomplish His purpose in us. All we see is His backside, and it feels like He has not protected us from dashing our feet against the rock as a result of our vain efforts to make something happen. We need to know that not a hair of our head escapes his watchful eye over us. He is teaching us to stop squirming. He is building within us a trust in Him that defies our circumstances. He is doing a deep work that, when complete, leaves us with a peace that passes all understanding. Know and understand that God's creative work in you is not measured by how favorable your circumstances, nor does this marvelous work stand or fall on your correct response to each and every circumstance. You have surrendered yourself to Him and He is taking you from there. With the apostle Paul you can say, "that He who has begun a good work in [me] will be faithful to complete it until the day of Jesus Christ."

The tempter would have you throw yourself down from the temple, to test the faithfulness of God by demanding that He intervene and making Him perform according to your liking or

comfort. Jesus had a cross to face in about three short years. Whether or not he fully understood at the time of His temptation that the cross was facing him, He was being prepared for it nevertheless. He agonized in the garden, and asked the Father if there was any way that He could take this cup from him. Nevertheless, “not my will but yours be done.” He would not demand of the Father that He take the cup from Him as a test of God’s faithfulness to him. He had fully surrendered to the Father, and it had already been tested in the wilderness. So it is that the impossible circumstances that we face in the wilderness are designed to test that place of full surrender. If we are truly followers of Christ, we will also encounter our cross—our place of death—that we are being prepared for even as we encounter circumstances that would tempt us to test God by insisting that He catch our fall so that we can avoid drinking of the cup of His suffering. You can be confident, that *despite your circumstances*, He is faithful! You are being asked to *accept* your circumstances, and His providence in them, trusting that there is ultimately a resurrection that He will accomplish in you.

Finally, the tempter takes Jesus to a high mountain and shows Him all the kingdoms of the world—promising to give them to Him if He will but bow down and worship Him. Satan had the power to do this. Indeed, it would not have been a temptation if Satan did not have this power! Jesus was single-minded. He ordered Satan away, saying “it is written, ‘You shall worship the Lord your God, and Him only you shall serve.’” One of the great temptations in the wilderness is to attempt, in our own flesh, to establish our own significance in the Kingdom of God. We have given up all to follow Christ. We have experienced a stripping such as we have never known before. It becomes a matter of great importance that this sacrifice not be in vain. We then attempt to establish kingdoms of our own making, even believing that these efforts are a direct response to the call of God.

I recall so clearly that when I was going through a major stripping in my life, I made a decision to move to Arkansas with my family to join a ministry here. This was, as I look back and reflect, a set-up by the Lord to motivate me to leave a career of some 30 years—a career in which I had become far too comfortable. Nevertheless, I came to Arkansas with certain expectations for ministry—expectations that were never met. Wanting to believe that my move here was not in vain, I decided to train to be an over-the-road truck driver and took a job with a company based in northwest Arkansas. I always wanted to drive a truck, but I justified doing this by believing that God was calling me to be a missionary to truck drivers. On my first trip out I got in an accident in a truck stop, followed soon by another truck stop incident. I developed an intense fear of going into truck stops! Within about 4 months I was losing sleep and dreaded going out on the road. I realized that, once again, I was trying to make something happen in my own flesh.

I have no regrets for any of this. God was in control throughout, and allowed my feeble efforts to establish my own kingdom. In the economy of God, I *had* to experience these defeats so that I could learn true obedience to the Spirit. My heart was right, but there was much to learn, and that is exactly what my wilderness was designed to do. And so is yours. I have no doubt that there are those reading these words who have been strongly tempted by Satan’s third great temptation of Jesus. And many of you have probably succumbed to this temptation—perhaps several times. Each time you do, a little more of your self-aggrandizing flesh is being consumed

in the refiner's fire. Do not doubt for one moment that God is in full control, even when you attempt to take control, and with each attempt is working your need for recognition out of you. Through these experiences, He is bringing you to a place of total surrender, so that His will becomes *your* will.

Jesus successfully met each of these temptations. This does not mean that He did not struggle. They would not truly have been temptations if He did not struggle fiercely. We, too, will successfully meet the temptations that come to us in the wilderness as we are fully surrendered to Him. This does not mean that we will not have failures. It is in these very failures that we are being made into the image of the Pattern Son. Only in the fierce struggle of the wilderness can we become overcomers, and it is here that our sonship established. This is cause for great rejoicing!

MOSES SPENDS FORTY YEARS IN THE DESERT

I am sure that you know the story of how Moses was rescued by the Pharaoh's daughter, and was raised as Egyptian royalty. He had it all. He knew, however, that he was a Hebrew and obviously had a strong love for the Hebrew people. One day, while out and about, he noticed that one of his own countrymen was being beaten by an Egyptian. Apparently Moses was strong of stature for the scripture simply says that he killed the Egyptian, and hid him in the sand, thinking that no one saw him. The next day, he saw two Hebrews fighting with each other. He asked the one who had done the initial wrong, why he was fighting his fellow Hebrew. He was rebuked and asked what made him the judge over them? Was he going to kill them as he killed the Egyptian? Suddenly, Moses became full of fear and fled to the desert because he knew that he was now a marked man.

It is important to take note that Moses was really forced into the desert. He had it made in the courts of the Pharaoh. Circumstances, however, now dictated that he leave if he was to save his life. We will also see this dynamic at work prior to the children of Israel leaving Israel to go into the wilderness. Most of us would not *voluntarily* choose the wilderness. Oh, we voluntarily make an initial surrender of our lives to Christ, but in the doing of this, we cannot possibly know what this will mean. We probably know that it will be costly, but we do not know exactly what this cost will be, and we certainly do not volunteer to lay our head on the chopping block until it becomes clear to us that we have no other choice if we are to be faithful to Christ. Moses loved the Hebrew people, and he knew that he was one of them. Despite the fact that he had all the privileges of Pharaoh's court, his heart was with his Hebrew countrymen. When push came to shove, he knew where his loyalties lie. At the same time, he did not have any idea of what this loyalty would cost him. All he knew is that he had to kill the Egyptian; and then intervene in the squabble between the Hebrews. I suspect that he did this with no thought as to the possible consequences. He just knew that he had to do it. These actions thrust him into circumstances that would quickly take him out of Pharaoh's court and all of its privileges. He had to flee into the wilderness. We don't know too much about the details of his life in the wilderness, but you can bet that they were a far cry from the lap of luxury he knew in Pharaoh's palace. He was being prepared to lead a rebellious people out of the most

civilized and powerful dynasty of his time. Scripture does, however, provide some instructive information about this time for Moses.

The first thing that we probably notice is that Moses, now about age 40, begins tending sheep. He has a major career change, and it is *not* one of upward mobility! The wilderness will almost surely require a withdrawal from our former way of life. This may or may not mean that we will have to resign our positions or leave our home communities. These positions and activities, however, which once occupied a central place in our lives, and which were the basis for our sense of purpose, now become without meaning or purpose comparatively. There are other things which now occupy our attention. It will often be that these things will seem quite lowly to us, and we will probably wonder from time to time why we are doing this. But somehow, we know that we really do not have a choice. We have lost the drive for what we once did, and even though we don't understand what we are doing now or why we are doing it, we can do nothing else. And as we do, we wait, we listen...we let God do what He must do within us.

We also learn when we read the Exodus account of Moses' time in the desert, that he took a wife. This represents a sense of permanence as he established family ties there, not only with his wife but with her extended family as well. We do not fully appreciate the significance of this in western society which is dominated by a highly mobile, nuclear family form. Moses would now be part of a much larger kinship system, and his very livelihood was now tied to his father-in-law Jethro. This relationship will become important later in Moses' life as well, when he is leading the children of Israel out of Egypt. The point to be made here, however, is that Moses put down roots in the wilderness. We often hear it preached today that we are not to become too comfortable in the wilderness because this is not to be our permanent dwelling place. While there is an element of truth to this, there is something that we can learn from Moses' experience. While the preachers mean well by what they say, these messages often result in unnecessary guilt, frustration and doubt among those who find themselves in the wilderness much longer than they planned. Such messages as these imply that our wilderness sojourn is to be only a short time, and if we are here too long, it must mean that we are enjoying the wilderness. These messages do a great disservice to those on this sojourn, and to the body of Christ generally, because they become just another source of discouragement to those who are already confronting great challenges. Such messages also have the effect of making those who are Promised Land bound to want to abort this journey, thinking that they must have made some misstep along the way. As months turned into years in my own wilderness journey, these old tapes from well-meaning sermons in the past would play in my mind as I wondered if I were getting some sort of sick enjoyment out of my desert wanderings. I now recognize this as the voice of the enemy seeking to discourage me from pressing forward toward the destiny that God has in store for me—and for others through me. The simple truth is that our time in the wilderness is usually much lengthier than these preachers would have us believe. We do have to make a life there, even though we know we are moving toward our time of completion and unveiling as the glorious sons of God. God both uses us and speaks through us in the wilderness. There is every evidence that Moses participated fully in the desert life of his extended family. We will as well, each in our own way. We are in the refiner's fire, to be sure,

but we have this knowledge: that we are here by His appointment and are being made into glorious sons of God!

We see the evidence of the deep work of the wilderness when God calls Moses from within the burning bush. God tells him that He has seen the oppression of His people in Egypt and that He is now about to deliver them. He is sending Moses to go to the Pharaoh to demand their release and to bring about their deliverance. Moses replies, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and that I should bring the children of Israel out of Egypt?" This response is most telling. There is no trace of the former self-confidence that characterized his actions against the Egyptian 40 years earlier. Gone is the self-assurance that he had when he sought to serve as the mediator between the two squabbling Hebrew men. Moses has clearly been emptied of all such confidence in his own abilities. He has to know from the Lord what he is to do and say to every hypothetical situation that he can think of. Despite the personal demonstration of power that the Lord provided him by turning the rod into a snake and back, and the turning of his hand leprous and then restoring it, Moses lacked all self confidence in going forward. What God was trying to get Moses to see in these demonstrations of power is that it was not in his (Moses') ability that this task would be completed. God was demonstrating *His* power. But Moses could not get beyond his own sense of inadequacy. After everything God had done to demonstrate His power, Moses' only response was, "O my Lord, I am not eloquent, neither before nor since You have spoken to Your servant; but I am slow of speech and slow of tongue." Eventually, Moses begs the Lord to send someone else.

Scripture then records that the Lord's anger was kindled against Moses. This is a curious response on God's part because Moses was responding in this way out of a depleted sense of self-righteousness or of his own personal adequacy. This is the very thing that Moses' wilderness was designed to accomplish in him. One would think that God should be pleased! Ah, but now God was asking Moses to move forth, not in his own strength, but in the power of God. The wilderness had so taken away Moses' confidence in himself that he was now having difficulty trusting that God would actually call him to this task! Is this not our experience as well? We have learned well our inadequacy. We have grown accustomed to inactivity as God has put us on the shelf for a season and taken us through the refining fire. We have learned well that we cannot accomplish *anything* in our own strength. Friends, God *is* pleased with this. The potter has been perfecting His vessel. But as we move through the refining process, God will give us opportunity to step out in faith. We will not understand what it is that God is calling us to do, or why He is asking us to do it. The ground is shifting. We are given an opportunity to now move forth in *His* strength rather than our own. We are tentative in doing this. We doubt, perhaps, that this is God asking us to do it in the first place, and that this is just our flesh wanting to establish its prominence once again. We have learned not to trust ourselves, but God is now asking us to fully place our trust in Him. Friends, if you have been in the wilderness for any length of time, be aware that God may be asking you to step out in faith. This will not be something that you are comfortable in doing. It will not be something that you can do in your natural strength or wisdom. It may look foolish. We must be prepared to be confronted by God while in the wilderness just as Moses was. This thing I know: God is getting ready to bring about the greatest deliverance mankind has ever known. He has been raising up

deliverers in the wilderness. When He calls upon us to move by His Spirit, He knows that he has well prepared us for it!

FORTY YEARS OF WANDERING IN THE WILDERNESS

The Hebrews enjoyed great prosperity in Egypt under the old Pharaoh, when Joseph was alive. The Lord did not want them to stay in Egypt, however. He had called them into a Promised Land—which was Canaan. Egypt was to be temporary. It was *not* the Promised Land, even though the people were doing very well here. They were still subject to a foreign ruler. So God used another Pharaoh, who came into power after Joseph's death and who did not remember Joseph, to deal with them harshly. He puts them to work in the desert heat making bricks. The labor is difficult, and the Egyptian taskmasters were not kind. Life in Egypt was no longer what it used to be. God had a plan for their deliverance in the form of Moses, but it would be 80 years after Moses' birth that this plan would be executed. God had an important purpose in the suffering of the Hebrews, however. It was this very suffering that gave them the incentive to leave Egypt when God's time would come to deliver them.

Egypt is a Place of Bondage

Egypt is usually a very comfortable place for the people of God. We have our good jobs, 3-car garages, vacation homes, and all the accoutrements that go with life in Egypt. Why would we want to leave? God loves us enough to make our circumstances difficult in Egypt to give us the incentive to leave. And so He causes a wrinkle in our otherwise smooth lives--perhaps financial distress or a health issue. Egypt still looks good. In fact, that is all that we know, so we labor all the harder trying to maintain our lifestyle. Life on the hamster wheel intensifies as we labor feverishly making our version of bricks. We are at the mercy of the pharaoh's in our lives, and not even aware of our need for deliverance. The pharaoh in our lives may be a demanding career. Many people, especially in more conservative religious circles, find themselves under the brutal regime of legalism. Still others serve the harsh taskmaster of a fear of man, continually seeking the approval of others in their community. *Anything* that would keep us from pursuing God with abandon represents a pharaoh for us.

The sober truth is that we are often not even aware that we are in bondage, and in need of deliverance while we are in the land of Egypt. Despite the hard labor, it was not within the realm of consciousness of the Hebrew children that there was an alternative to Egypt. It took a deliverer to confront the Pharaoh and to demand that he let the Hebrew people go. God brings His deliverer in different ways and forms. My deliverer came in the form of people who were more advanced in the realm of the Spirit than was I. I recognized the life that was in these people, and the truth they spoke resonated deeply within me. There was a stirring deep within me to pursue more than I was experiencing within the comfortable realms of my career, community and church life. I believe that the deliverer for many, if not most people is another person more advanced in their walk in the Spirit. Because they have already walked in the realities of the Kingdom, they represent and model something that we could not have before imagined. Their qualification as our deliverer is based solely on the fact that they, themselves,

have walked out of Egypt and spent their own time in the desert, just as Moses did thousands of years ago.

A predictable thing happened when Moses and Aaron demanded the Israelites' release. The Pharaoh's heart was hardened, and he increased the brick-making demands. He now required them to gather their own straw for the bricks, while maintaining the same daily quota. The taskmasters became harsher. Egypt is controlled by a harsh ruler, friends! As long as we do not challenge that system life is bearable, even comfortable. When we begin to challenge that system, however, the ruler of this world becomes threatened. The point at which we make a decision to leave Egypt, to be obedient to the call of the Spirit, there will be push back, intimidation tactics from the enemy to discourage us. The enemy knows that the more time that we spend on this journey of obedience to the Spirit, the more difficult it will be for him to discourage us. Many of you have experienced well-intentioned friends trying to "talk sense" into you. You may have even had to face ostracism and other hard ball tactics by people who are convinced that you have gone off the deep end. As you begin to share what God is revealing to you with your pastor or church leaders, they seek to correct you, trying to make you believe that you are being deceived. When you are not deterred, high pressure strategies are invoked. Some of you have experienced all manner of slander from the mouth of religious leaders who are threatened by your obedience. All the forces of hell are aligned against the coming out of the sons of God.

The good news, friend, is that God is bigger than the Pharaoh. In fact, the Exodus account states that it was God who hardened the heart of the Pharaoh! He did this, I believe, so that the children of Israel could witness His mighty power to deliver them. The Lord brought ten plagues upon Egypt before Pharaoh finally relented and released the Hebrew children. The last plague was the killing of the firstborn males of all the land of Egypt, from the firstborn son of Pharaoh, to the lowest servant, including even the firstborn male of all of every animal in Egypt. This was the occasion for the Passover, when, upon seeing the blood over the doorposts of the households of His people, the Lord would pass over that household and not bring death to the firstborn of Israel. The Passover is such an important event that God uses this to mark the beginning of the Hebrew calendar! This is the plague that finally penetrated the heart of Pharaoh, and he agreed to let the Hebrew children go.

Bonding to God's Heart at the Red Sea

The softening of Pharaoh's heart would be only temporary, however. He reconsidered what he had done, and gathered his armies to pursue the Israelites. We know the story of how, when the children of Israel were caught between the Red Sea on one side and Pharaoh's army on the other, the Lord parted the waters of the Red Sea which allowed the Israelites to pass through on dry land. As Pharaoh's army pursued them, once they reached the other side, God stopped the wind, the waters retreated, and Pharaoh's army was thoroughly drenched...or something like that! Once again, God was demonstrating His power and His care for His people. This would be an occasion for them to remember as they would face difficult circumstances in the wilderness.

I have come to believe that this experience of the Israelites is a universal experience of the chosen people of God today whom He has called out of Egypt. Whatever our circumstances were in Egypt, God demonstrates His awesome power in our lives and thereby bonds us to Him powerfully. For me, it was the deliverance from a stronghold in my life that had held me captive for all of my adult life. I was powerless over it, but God demonstrated His power! Others experience the breaking of addictions. Someone else might experience the restoration of a marriage, with Christ now at its center. The circumstances are varied, but they are all designed to bond our hearts to the Lord, for we will need this in the days, weeks, months and even years of wilderness ahead. It is interesting that God did not take the Hebrew children by way of the shortest route, which would have been through land inhabited by the Philistines. He knew that they would be intimidated by the Philistines. He had to build up in them a trust and confidence in Him before facing these giants. This was the purpose of the Red Sea experience. And it is the purpose of the Red Sea experience in all of our lives.

A Terrible History of Complaining

The children of Israel have a history of complaining on this journey. They complained when Pharaoh's slave drivers increased the burden for brickmaking. They complained when hedged in between Pharaoh's army and the Red Sea. "Because *there were* no graves in Egypt, have you taken us away to die in the wilderness?" they cried. "[I]t would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than that we should die in the wilderness." This is a pattern that developed early in their wilderness experience, and it was repeated many times throughout the course of the journey. God was not pleased with this response. It is probably the most deadly response that we can have. Jesus said that it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a man, but what comes out of the mouth (Matt. 15:11). There is power in the spoken word, and when we speak with complaining we begin to feel our burdens even more. We lose sight of the One who has called us, and we forget all of the times and ways that He has demonstrated his power and trustworthiness in our lives. Believe me, I know. I probably beat the record for complaining set thousands of years ago by the Hebrew children! I know the power of this spoken word. It is such an easy seduction to get our eyes off Christ and on to our circumstances. When we then voice our fears, doubts, and complaints, these circumstances only loom larger, and it becomes a vicious cycle that will kill and destroy the vitality of our walk with Christ. If you find yourself in this cycle, I would urge you to *repent* of this, and begin speaking by faith once again. You will not *feel* this faith, nor will there be things in your circumstances that give you a basis for speaking forth in faith. You speak it because God put it in your heart at one point to venture on this journey. He has called you here, and He has a marvelous destiny for you. This is His promise, and *this* is what you speak despite the fact that there are no feelings or corroborating evidence behind it! God is training us to walk by faith. Through *all* of our circumstances—good and bad—He is teaching us to walk by faith and not by sight. When we walk by faith, we can speak only what we see by faith, for *this* is the reality in which we walk. Our journey is not one of wandering around aimlessly in a wilderness, even though this is how it appears to the one who does not walk by faith. No, dear brothers and sisters! Our journey is one of walking *through* the wilderness *to* the Promised Land! This, the Promised Land, is what we see through the eyes of faith. And He is faithful to bring us there.

After crossing the Red Sea, there are more challenges. The waters are bitter at Marah. They experience hunger as well. Once again, they murmur against Moses. Once again, they are looking back to Egypt where, despite their oppression, they were fed well. I do not think it a coincidence that the first temptation that Jesus faced in His wilderness was the challenge to turn the stones into bread. He hungered. The wilderness is, indeed, a place of hungering. The first hunger that we experience is for the things that we once had and which we now miss. We may have been accustomed to a lot of activity in the church or in community affairs. We may have been in positions of power and influence. We may have had the luxury of many friends with whom to socialize. These or other things which we have used to fill our souls are the very things that God is stripping us of in the wilderness. The feeling of deprivation can be intense, especially early on. We even begin to wonder if we made the right decision. Did we *really* hear God? None of our friends are affirming this decision. Oh, how we hunger for the affirmation of others!

Something happens at some point in our wilderness journey, however. If we can resist the temptation to go back to Egypt, and if we can learn to trust Father in even the dire circumstances, we begin to notice a change in our hunger pangs. We realize, perhaps one morning when we wake up, that we really *don't* want to go back to Egypt. Our desires have changed. I remember so clearly, about a year after leaving my teaching position, and right after I quit driving truck, that I applied for a job at a local community college here in Arkansas because I was getting frustrated with this wilderness. I wanted to do *something* to feel productive. But right after I applied for this position I realized that I had no desire to go back into the classroom. God had called me to something else, and almost imperceptibly, He was draining out of me the desire for the Egyptian life I had known before. I realized that I was longing for whatever He had in store for me. Oh yes, God is at work within you during this wilderness journey in ways that you do not even realize! As the lure back to Egypt is being worked out of you, you discover another hunger that you were never before so aware of. It is a hunger to walk in the fullness of what God has destined for you. There is a deep longing to commune with the Lord and to experience union with Him. Your mind is ever more occupied with what God is doing and the part that He has for you in all of this. It is no longer about building *your* ministry, but about knowing him. You realize that you have not even begun to plumb the depths of what God has in store and the longing of your heart is to explore this new terrain of the Spirit that is now opening up to you in fresh ways. Your hunger is no longer for Egypt, but it is now for the Promised Land!

God responded to the Israelites' hunger by raining manna from heaven. This was food that they had never seen before. In fact the word "manna" in Hebrew means "what is it?" God was providing, and He was providing with *new* food. Moreover, He fed them *daily*. They were given explicit instructions to gather each morning just enough manna for that day—except for the day before Sabbath when they were to gather enough for the Sabbath as well. If they were to gather more than what was needed, it would get worms and would rot. Friends, if ever there were an experience of the ancient Israelites that represents a shadow and a type of the wilderness journey to which the Lord has called us, it can be found in the manner in which they were fed. The bread with which we are fed while in the wilderness is unlike anything we have

encountered before. While in Egypt we were accustomed to feeding our *souls* on ear tickling orations from pedigreed clergy with several degrees behind their names. Alternatively, if we have come out of other churches such as Pentecostal or Charismatic traditions, we have had a diet of feel-good worship music, perhaps, or emotionally charged sermons that leave our soulish man saying, “My, wasn’t the pastor anointed today!” Some on this wilderness journey may not come out of formal church backgrounds prior to answering the call to Christ (I believe that we will see more and more of these sojourners). Your manna was perhaps a diet of television—even Christian television. This has been *soul food* that we have been feasting on, and we have become accustomed to satisfying the desires of our carnal man. The food that God is introducing us to in the wilderness is *spirit food*. We are being weaned from the soul food, and this is often not pleasant, especially at first. But somewhere deep, below the level of our soul, our spirits are being fed. It is just the right food for us to be growing and maturing into the sons that we have been called to be. While there may be times for feasting, normally we are given bread *daily*, just as Jesus taught his disciples to pray. The Lord is teaching us to be dependent upon Him for our sustenance on a daily basis. Many of us have been accustomed to going from meeting to meeting, conference to conference, indulging ourselves on a smorgasbord of junk food that is making somebody rich. This is not the way God feeds His children in the wilderness, and it is not the food that prepares us to rule and reign with Him as sons.

It is noteworthy, however, that this is not the last time that the children of Israel complain because of their hunger. They would grow tired of the manna that was being rained down, and they wanted meat. The Lord is once again angry with their complaining, but it is Moses who is carrying the burden. He is caught between the Lord’s anger and the people’s felt needs. It is now Moses who cries out to the Lord, challenging Him, “Why have you brought this trouble on your servant? What have I done to displease you that you put the burden of all these people on me? Did I conceive all these people?” God responds to Moses by having him bring some 70 elders whom Moses recognizes as leaders. The burden will be shared with them. Despite God’s anger, He recognizes the struggle, and He is intent on bringing His people into the Promised Land. He sees that Moses is coming to the end of himself. He raises up leaders to share in this burden. This is God’s provision for a wilderness people. I have witnessed the frustration and distress of people as they attempt to negotiate the wilderness path. I know too well how overwhelming that it can be. The enemy would tempt us to turn back to Egypt where there is tasty food for our souls. Yet, we have been through too much to turn back now. God has placed a deep burden on my heart for others who have tasted of the deep things of the Spirit, but for whom the lure of Egypt continually pulls them back. The burden for God’s people who have begun this journey is great. How grateful I am for others who have gone before me who, not even knowing me, have borne this burden that I may experience the victory of the Promised Land. It is now with joy that I share this burden to see the increase of the Kingdom in others!

Battles with the Enemy

Shortly after crossing the Red Sea, the Israelites find themselves in battle with the Amalekites. The Amalekites clearly do not represent the threat that the Philistines do because God directed

them through the Red Sea with the express purpose of avoiding the Philistines. He knew they would be overwhelmed by their power. Nevertheless, the wilderness is full of enemies who would keep us from reaching our Promised Land. We must learn to defeat these enemies because the Promised Land itself is occupied by enemy forces which must also be overcome when we arrive there. There is training for spiritual warfare that takes place in the wilderness. The children of Israel clearly saw the hand of God in this battle. Whenever Moses' hands were raised, the Israelites were victorious; when Moses' arms became tired and he let down his hands, they suffered defeat. And so it was that Aaron and Hur held up Moses' arms to secure the victory. This was a battle that was won first in the Spirit and then on the battlefield. And it was won in the Spirit through the unified effort of Moses, Aaron and Hur. These leaders learned to function as one body in that place, and it secured the victory. Moses then ordered that a memorial be built to commemorate the victory. The Lord was instilling in his people the importance of remembering His mighty works among them.

This was but the first of several battles that they would face in the wilderness, and there would be still more battles to face once they reached the Promised Land. The Lord has promised them that He will go before them in all of their battles and he will defeat the enemy. For their part, the children of Israel are not to enter into any covenants with the enemies that they confront. We must understand that the spiritual life is warfare—whether we find ourselves in the wilderness or in the Promised Land. There is an enemy in the land. This is an enemy that will use all sorts of strategies to defeat us. When the enemy cannot defeat us through frontal assault, he will attempt to seduce us, as was the case when the Moabite women seduced the men of Israel. Later, after reaching the Promised Land, the enemy (Gibeon) enters into a deceptive covenant with Israel, even though the Lord is very clear that the Israelites are not to make covenants with any of the foreign peoples they encounter. This makes great problems for them later. They are to be a pure and separate people. God is still calling His people today to “come out from among them.” There can be no compromise with the systems of man, no relationships forged, no entanglements that would distract or impede the moving forth of the Kingdom of God within and among us.

Learning to Function as a Free People Under God's Rule

There is an interesting scene presented in the eighteenth chapter of Exodus. Moses' father-in-law comes to visit him, and sees that his entire day is spent settling disputes among the people. Jethro gives Moses a little fatherly advice, urging him to (1) teach the people the statutes of God, and (2) to find godly men who can settle the minor disputes, so that Moses can focus on the more complex cases. What is revealed in this account is that there are conflicts among the Israelites that must be resolved. What a different place they are now! When they were in Egypt, they were under the control of the taskmasters. They were told what to do. Practically every facet of their lives was controlled by the Egyptian overlords. They were now out from under this bondage, and in their new found freedom, they soon came into conflict with the wants and needs of others. Disputes arose which needed to be resolved. As long as we are under the dominion of a foreign ruler, whether this be the bureaucracy of our jobs and careers, or the established order of organized religion, there is comparatively little conflict; and when there is conflict there are established procedures to resolve this conflict. Life is relatively

smooth. In the wilderness, however, life gets messy. The rules are less clear as we leave the bondage of Egypt and charter a new course toward the Promised Land. Gone are all of the old rules and rule enforcers. We are learning to be directed instead by the Holy Spirit. All the while, our flesh and carnality is being dealt with and we see it rearing its ugly head as we encounter others on this wilderness road to freedom who are also experiencing the same refining fires as are we. There will be messy conflicts. Some of these conflicts will be with others who share our vision for the Promised Land, but who have different ideas as to how to get there. These are probably the easiest to resolve, as we learn to focus on the vision that God has imprinted in our hearts. Other conflicts will be with those whose vision is still carnal. The refining fires of the wilderness have not yet exposed the dross in their lives and we find ourselves coming up against all manner of ungodly motives. Hard words of correction may have to be spoken. Ultimately, if these impurities are not dealt with in the lives of these individuals, we will eventually have to part ways or risk being distracted from the vision birthed in us that has led us into this wilderness in the first place. Just as the Lord dealt severely with sin and carnality in the camp of Israel, even ordering death to perpetrators of evil, so it is that He will deal severely with unrighteousness in the camp today. He is purifying His sons, and if there are those who would undermine the purposes of God with another gospel, He will bring a separation. As sons-in-training we will be called upon to make judgments and to exercise great spiritual discernment in dealing with the inevitable conflicts that arise in a people traversing the uncharted territory that the wilderness embodies. The Lord would teach us *His way*, of handling these conflicts. Sometimes this will involve gentle restoration; other times it will involve harsh correction; still other times it will involve severing of relationship. We learn how to make these judgments in this training ground that we call the wilderness.

Then comes the day when the law is given to Moses atop Mount Sinai. This is a holy place. The people are not to even *touch* the mountain or they will surely die. But Moses is called to the top of the mountain. He is here for forty days, fasting. When the Lord gives the law to Moses, He tells him that if the people will keep His covenant, they shall be a peculiar people, set apart unto Him. They shall be a kingdom of priests, a holy nation. The timing of the giving of the law, early on in the wilderness experience is not coincidental. God is establishing His rule, and He does it quite dramatically with smoke on the mountain for all to see. The Israelites have already come through quite an ordeal at the Red Sea, and God is now establishing His law with them. This He does in the lives of all of His people as they venture into obedience unto God. He is now establishing His law upon our hearts as He trains us to hear His voice in the wilderness. He is calling us to be true to His covenant with us, and as we do, He is making us into a peculiar people, set apart unto Him. This is not a covenant of stone, but a covenant etched of the Spirit deep within our innermost being.

This is a covenant that is not readily embraced. It is so totally other, and it is one of waiting on the Lord and moving only when the cloud moves. Nothing of our experience in Egypt could have prepared us for this covenant. Indeed, we are prone to the ways of Egypt as we seek to find our way in the wilderness. The children of Israel grew tired of waiting for Moses to come down off the mountain. They reverted to the ways of Egypt as they asked Aaron to make for them a golden calf. The Lord's anger was kindled against them. Lest we be too quick to judge

these rebellious Hebrews, are we not prone to look to the arm of the flesh when we do not see the Lord moving as we think He should? Do we not grow weary of waiting on the Lord for *His* commandments to us, and do we not seek to raise up our own idols—goals, visions, ministry attempts—that represent our attempts to make something happen because we think the Lord has forgotten us? Oh, friend, how difficult it is to wait on the Lord. How prone we are to substituting our idols for His Word. And yes, how important it is to submit ourselves to the chastisement of the Lord as he purges us from all of the Egyptian-prone tendencies within us!

The disobedience of the Hebrews is not without grave consequence. The Lord orders that the sons of Levi strap on their swords and commence to kill some 3000 of their own countrymen for this disobedience. There are a couple of things in this incident that are so very relevant for our journey. First, the Lord does a curious thing in the ordering of this slaughter in that it is an order that is in direct contradiction to the law that He has just handed down to Moses that included the command, “Thou shalt not kill.” It is most noteworthy that Moses, who had just been given the law, was obviously not bound by that very law! Moses listened to God, and He could hear the voice of the Lord. He was obedient to this voice, even above the law that had just been inscribed in stone. Friends, Moses was not merely a law-giver; even then, he was a forerunner of a new law, a law of the Spirit, that God is intending to inscribe upon the hearts of everyone that he would call His son. The natural thing for Moses to have done would have been to contend with the Lord that to kill 3000 of His people would violate the very law that had just been handed down from Mount Sinai! Moses understood, however, that he lived by every word that proceeded out of the mouth of God.

It is also worthy of note that the slaughter of the 3000 was at the hands of their own countrymen. It was, in fact, the priestly tribe, the tribe of Levi, who took the sword to the people. These were the righteous ones. They were the ones who were on the Lord’s side. And they were obedient, even to the killing of their own friends and neighbors. The scriptural account says that they took the sword to their brothers, their companions and their neighbors. How painful and difficult this must have been! Those who would be priests must take up the sword today, no less than these, our spiritual ancestors did. The sword that we take up, however, is not a sword of metal. It is the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God. Hebrews 4:12 states that “...the **word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division *of* soul and spirit, and *of* joints and marrow, and *is* a discernor *of* the thoughts and intents *of* the heart.**” We are called, as sons and priests, to speak forth the Word of the Lord. This Word has both the power to bring life and to bring death (Proverbs 18:21), and it will be as God ordains. This is a most sobering word, and only those who have truly submitted to the chastisement of God, who have come to a place of separation unto God as the Levites of this hour, are qualified to wield this sword.

The Challenge of Moving Forward to the Promised Land

The time comes to explore the promised land of Canaan. Spies are sent out—one from each of the tribes of Israel. They are asked to bring back a report of the land: Is it fruitful? Are the cities fortified? Are their giants in the land? The spies explore the land, and after 40 days of exploring, they return with samples of the abundant fruit of the land. There is a catch,

however. The land is full of giants and the cities are fortified with walls. Ten of the twelve spies dwell on the overwhelming danger of the enemy. Despite the fact that the Lord has promised to go before them in every battle, these spies would turn Israel away from entering the Promised Land. Only two—Joshua and Caleb—hold fast to the promise of the Lord and urge the people to move forward because the Lord is on their side. We have this notion in much of the church world that once we reach the borders of the Promised Land, life will be a bed of roses. The victorious life is one with little challenges, we believe, and if we do face challenges, we easily overcome them. I am convinced that we get this idea because we look at church leaders, most who have never left Egypt in the first place and live luxuriously off the spoils of that foreign land. Those who *have* ventured out of Egypt by faith are usually less than transparent with the struggles and battles that they face, and present themselves to their parishioners as having “arrived.” It is a rare pastor in our churches today that truly models the warfare that is entailed in taking the Promised Land. But it is warfare, and there will be personal as well as corporate battles that must be won. The enemy *is* daunting, but the Lord has promised to go before us!

The twelve spies represent the spiritual forerunners of our day. All of them came back with an *accurate* report of what they saw. There *were* giants in the land and they were HUGE! The land *was* flowing with milk and honey, and all of the spies reported it to be so. Only two of the spies, however, came back with a report that they could take the land. They did not base this report on an evaluation of the size of the armies, calculating that the Hebrew army was stronger than the enemy. Oh no! That was the basis for the negative report of the ten. Israel’s army was *not* stronger in the natural. Joshua and Caleb’s report was based on what they saw through eyes of faith. They knew that their God was bigger than any enemy. Alas, however, the people listened to the ten spies with the negative report. It is a report of defeat before the battle ever begins. It is one of resignation—either to life in the wilderness, or worse still, returning to Egypt. Friends, this is the same report that I hear from so many forerunners of the move of God in our day. God has, in our own lifetimes, poured out His Spirit in some remarkable ways. He has given us a taste of the Promised Land. There have been those who have gone on ahead, seen things in the Spirit of what is in store for us. Most of them have settled for so much less than what God has prepared for them and for those who would receive their report. I am aware of any number of well-known “leaders” in Christian circles who began their journey with a heart of radical obedience to the Lord. These were truly men and women of God. They encountered opposition along the way. They experienced the fierceness of the enemy. There have been very few Joshuas or Calebs coming back with the report of faith. Most have gone the way of Egypt, using Madison Avenue and other marketing strategies to build and maintain a “following.” I have read the histories of several moves of God, and the biographies of individuals involved in these moves. How disappointing it is to see what began as awesome and mighty acts of God among His people, now be harnessed and controlled by these same individuals because they do not trust the sovereign power of God to move in *His* way. It is so much easier to resort to the strategies and techniques of the world. The minute that this happens, the Spirit of God departs.

This is precisely what happened with the children of Israel. When they heard of the anger of God against them because of their unbelief, they attempted to make it happen in their own strength. They went atop a high mountain to launch an attack on the enemy occupying the Promised Land. The account says that neither the ark of the covenant, nor Moses departed the camp with them, however. The presence of the Lord was not with them. They were attempting to make something happen in their own strength, and they were roundly defeated! God had other plans. They would wander another 20 years in the wilderness (they had already wandered for 20 years), so that their wilderness time would be equal in years to the number of days the spies were in Canaan. God was purging them, such that none of those over 20 years of age (except for Joshua and Caleb) would enter the Promised Land. Do you see what this experience is foreshadowing? None of the old carnality can enter into the Promised Land! God will keep us in the wilderness until the carnal generation within us has died. Only that which has been made pure by the refining fires of the wilderness will take this land. This is exactly what took place with the Israelites 20 years later when they crossed the Jordan under the command of Joshua, carrying the ark of the covenant before them, marching mightily into battle against the fortified city of Jericho. These warriors had sanctified themselves, and the ark of the Lord was carried across the Jordan ahead of them. Before going into battle with Jericho, these young men were circumcised, made pure by the cutting away of the foreskin. This is the very circumcision that we, too, must go through. Ours is a circumcision of the heart that is taking place, even as the Lord is cutting out the carnal nature within us. The Promised Land is ours to take. The wilderness is our flint knife that is cutting away all that longs to go back to Egypt. Through this wilderness journey, we are being made pure, and we are learning who we are as sons, that we can go forward in His strength to co-labor with Him in establishing His Kingdom, our Promised Land, on earth as it is in Heaven!

SOME CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

When we understand the scriptural account as a shadow and a type of the journey that the Lord has laid out for us, we can see much more clearly the important function that the wilderness plays in our spiritual life. It is almost a truism to say that the wilderness is for our purification and for our preparation to rule and reign with Christ in His Kingdom. Despite the fact that most of us *know* this is a process that we must go through, almost all of us would wish that we didn't have to. We try to avoid it. But unless we decide to stay in Egypt—which is to say, in the comfortable place that dictates our daily lives and routines—the wilderness is inevitable. The pain that we endure, that feels so evil, is the very thing that is purifying us. It is the flint knife being taken to our heart to strip away all of the impurity and carnality that we have inherited from old Adam. The sense of lostness is the path to being found by Him who has laid out this very path ahead of us. The path is unseen. There are no roadmaps with reference points to give us a clue as to where we are on the journey. All that we have is a cloud by day and pillar of fire by night to follow. Our trust and confidence must be in Him alone, and until it is, we are not prepared to go against the Caananites and all of the other giants that inhabit our Promised Land. Until we are stripped of all confidence in our natural abilities, we are not fit to rule and reign with Christ.

Those who have not ventured on this journey, choosing instead to stay in Egypt, do not understand the function of the wilderness. They observe the trials that we are enduring, and wonder what we have done wrong. They are most well-meaning in their counsel to us, but their best counsel can only point us back to Egypt. Many of these are close friends, even family members—some of them immersed in the church system. They know the vocabulary—they may even know the vocabulary of the wilderness. But until they have truly *experienced* the wilderness, casting off all dependence on the systems of Egypt in radical obedience to Christ, their counsel is hollow. We can now only listen to Him as He comes to us through His precious Holy Spirit. Others will speak into us throughout our journey, but we must always be listening to that voice within us that would resonate with what is spoken by others. If it doesn't, we cannot receive the most well-meaning counsel. We are learning to follow the cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night.

We are being changed in this process. We will not always recognize it. In fact, most of the time, will probably not *feel* as spiritual as we were before we left the land of Egypt. Then, we were acting to please men, and we were made to feel spiritual and righteous—by men. We no longer have these props to bolster our sense of righteousness. God is stripping us of all of this. Know and understand, dear brother and sister, that you are not alone on this journey! There are scores of others, and there is going to come a day when these saints, purified by the journey, find one another and experience true body life together, pure and untainted, without spot or wrinkle, as the New Jerusalem, the Bride of Christ. Right now, you are being prepared to be part of that Bride. It is in the very nature of God's dealings with us, that this be done in the loneliness of the wilderness.

POSTSCRIPT

When I began writing this about a month ago, I knew that the Lord was pressing me to write it. He had been taking me through my own wilderness experience for several years, and He was now making it clear that I was to share some of the truths that had been revealed to me through this difficult process. What I was *not* prepared for was that He would use this writing to reveal even more and deeper things that He had to do within me as I wrote. I am learning that He will set me up this way to accomplish His work in me. This is a painful process as He is uncovering hidden things within my heart that have been blocking the triumph of His Spirit within my life. I have been resisting His deeper work, and only now is He exposing and convicting me that I have been doing this. I am grateful for this painful work, and the prayer of my heart is that *everything* that is not of Him will be dislodged. I humbly ask for your prayers that this work will be completed, and that He will continue to pour out abundantly of His grace such that His Spirit will be ever more manifest within me as I submit to His rod of correction. I give thanks to my Lord for His faithfulness in doing this.