

THROUGH THE WILDERNESS

Introduction:

Wilderness, not a very inviting word is it? When you hear that word it does not evoke images of peace and tranquility, but ones of hardship, lack and travail. The word hardly seems like it should have a place within the Christian vernacular. But I will show you, in this essay, that God has used the concept of a wilderness to great effectiveness in molding His people into vessels of honor. Moreover, it serves as a rite of passage that all Christians must endure if they are to go on to maturity in the things of God. So the question is not whether or not you will go through the wilderness, but whether you will ever exit from it. I will show by the Scriptures how God has used this model for spiritual growth, both in the old and the new covenants. The wilderness is not something to be feared, but approached with sober-mindedness, and confidence, that although treacherous, the road through it can be successfully navigated.

Now let us familiarize ourselves with this word, “wilderness”. According to Strong’s concordance, the word-translated wilderness is *eremos* (2048), and it means; “lonesome, waste, desert, desolate, solitary.”

Webster’s defines the word thusly; 1. A region uncultivated and uninhabited. 2. A barren, empty or open area of any nature.

In the reading of this essay, many of you will find that you are indeed in the wilderness, and in some cases, have spent many years there. I will teach you how to identify if you are in the wilderness or not and, if you are, how to exit as rapidly as possible. So buckle up, for the ride may get a little bumpy.

Chapter 1: Why the Wilderness?

I think that a reasonable person would ask, “Why would God make His people go through the wilderness? What benefit is there to be derived from traversing the spiritual wastelands?” Have you ever wondered why the children of Israel wandered in the wilderness for forty years? It is clear that it was not a matter of geography, for the actual area could have been crossed in a few weeks. It is also clear that in the wilderness, many of the Hebrews suffered hardship, and a great number eventually lost their lives there, never crossing over into the Promised Land. So then, was God simply acting out some perverse scheme to afflict those who served Him, or did it serve a nobler cause? I will present the case, and you can decide.

The first thing that must be recognized is that when someone comes to Christ Jesus, and becomes born again, he does not immediately walk in his deliverance from all of the things that would tend to weigh him down and hinder him in his ability to serve God without distraction. Remember, when we come to Christ Jesus, we receive a new spirit, which is free from the nature of sin. We do, however, continue to walk around in the same sinful flesh, and we are still saddled with the same carnal mind. Left alone, these things would severely hamper our ability to grow into maturity and become useful to God. So it is vitally important for Him to set us free from these hindrances, so that we

may grow into the fullness of our covenant. I'll give you one guess where all of this takes place. That's right, the wilderness. In order for God to be able to fully reveal Himself to us, and to completely envelop us with His love, we must fully trust Him. And in order to fully trust Him, we must be divested of all of our notions of worldly reliance. In the early stages of our walk with the Lord, we are still saddled with all of the weaknesses of the flesh, and the coping mechanisms that we learned from the world. The presence of these things tend to hinder our faith since, in a time of trouble, we look to them first, rather than to God. The wilderness serves as the place where God teaches us to rely on Him alone for direction and sustenance. Since we are all born in sin and estranged from the Lord, our natural tendency is to always side in with the worldly way in all of the issues of life. This is, of course, counterproductive to our roles as Christians. The purpose of going through the wilderness is to show us the futility of the world that we might learn to fully trust God. The result of trusting in God is spiritual maturity or perfection. This can only occur by severing our reliance on the world. This severing is achieved through enduring the suffering that occurs in the conflict, which arises due to the contrast between the ways of the world and the ways of God.

As an example, let us carefully consider the case of the aforementioned children of Israel. After they had spent 430 years in Egypt, they had undoubtedly developed a certain comfort, even in the midst of their hardship. They had food and shelter, and they lived in safety, free from harm from enemies. Now along came God who, through His servant Moses, set them free and led them out of Egypt. But where did He lead them, to a spot of lush greenery, a bountiful oasis with rivers of cool flowing water? No, He led them to a barren wilderness, devoid of the necessities of life. What was their response to these events? They whined and complained, and they continued to look fondly over their shoulders, reminding themselves of the provisions that they had when they were still in Egypt. They preferred to return to bondage, rather than to accept the deliverance of the Lord God who had brought them forth with a mighty hand. They seemed all too willing to forget that they were harshly treated by Pharaoh, even to the destruction of their newborn children. In all of this, they demonstrated a staggering lack of faith in God's ability to sustain them, and to bring them through. It did not take them long to forget Him and to return to idolatry.

He endured all manner of rebellion from them in the hope that they would repent of their evil and trust Him to keep His word. Remember, it had been prophesied for centuries that He would deliver them in exactly this manner, that He would bring them to a land that He had promised to their fathers, and they would be blessed amongst the sons of Adam. Here they were, at the threshold of the fulfillment of these promises, and all they could think about was the leeks and onions that they had left behind in Egypt. After putting up with nine episodes of rebellion, He finally brought them to the threshold of the Promised Land, and He put them to one final test. He sent twelve spies into the land to reconnoiter, and to determine if the land was indeed as He had promised. When they returned, ten of them reported that the land was indeed as the Lord had spoken, but there was a problem. The land was already occupied with formidable inhabitants, and it was extremely unlikely that they would be able to prevail against them. (I suppose that when God promised them the land, it escaped His notice that giants already occupied it). There were two, however, that had learned the lesson the wilderness had to teach. They had complete trust in the promise of God, and they did not see the presence of giants as a

hindrance at all. Unfortunately, the voices of the ten who were unbelieving prevailed, and the hearts of the people failed them because of fear. This was the tenth and final insult to the integrity of the Lord God, and He purposed in His heart to destroy the house of Abraham. The student of the Scriptures knows that Moses was successful in dissuading Him but, nevertheless, all of those who were over twenty years old would die in the wilderness, and never enter into the Promised Land. This brings to mind the following proverb: “Those who fail to learn the lesson that the wilderness has to teach, will surely die there.”

Be mindful that the wilderness is not merely an old covenant phenomenon, but it is a gauntlet that all Christians must run. Without it, we could never go on to maturity and become useful to God. And also, like the children of Israel, those Christians who do not learn the lessons that the wilderness has to teach, will never know the fullness of their covenant, and they will live their lives in futility.

Chapter 2: The Wilderness Sequence of Events

Inasmuch as the wilderness is a rite of passage for those who have been chosen by God for fellowship, its operation is governed by certain rules. The first is that the wilderness is not for unbelievers. They reside in a different neighborhood, one that is circumscribed by the road to perdition. Prior to entering the wilderness, one must have been already delivered by the hand of God. Remember, that God could not have taken Israel through the wilderness, until He had first delivered them out of the hand of Pharaoh. So according to the New Testament model, one must first be born again before he can enter the wilderness.

There is another prerequisite to the wilderness experience. One must also be led by the Spirit into the wilderness and, in order for this to occur, he must be filled with the Spirit. This is also known as being baptized with the Spirit. This is critical, for it is He who actually leads you through the wilderness, as He is the one who teaches you the lessons necessary to eventually exit it, and to cross over Jordan. Referring back to our old covenant model, was it not the Spirit of God who led the children of Israel around in the wilderness? He manifested as a pillar of smoke during the day, and a pillar of fire at night. In this way, all of Israel could see Him and know that God was with them, and that He would bring them through. We also have a wonderful New Covenant model to consider, for the Captain of our salvation was required to show us, by every example, that which is necessary for us to enter into fellowship with the Father. Recall how He was baptized by John, and then received the Holy Spirit. Being led by that same Spirit, He went into the wilderness to be tested and tried, an ordeal that lasted for forty days.

Once in the wilderness, one can expect to have to endure many temptations, trials, and tests, all of which take place over a variable amount of time. The range of time that one may be expected to spend in the wilderness varies between forty days, and forty years (or one generation, which essentially means that you die there). Forty days is chosen as the lower limit since that is the amount of time that the Lord Jesus had to spend there in order to learn obedience. (I seriously doubt that anyone can learn that lesson faster than He could.) As was the case with the Son of Man, the main adversary in the wilderness is the devil. The method of attack that he employs is to appeal to the flesh and to provoke pride. Remember that he would really prefer Christians to suffer the same fate as the

children of Israel, which is to die in futility in the wilderness. So, in exactly the same manner as with the Children of Israel, challenges will present themselves. We may suffer lack, and endure attack on our persons by sickness and disease. There are those who may seek to harm us. There will especially be those like the sons of rebellion in the house of Israel, who seduced the people into serving false gods. They will seek to destroy your faith in the living word of God, and to substitute false doctrine based on the traditions of men, which are powerless to deliver. The aim is to weigh the new convert down with carnality, ignorance, and unbelief. In so doing, that person is not at all capable of operating in the fullness of their covenant with the Lord. At best, they will slide into Heaven with the smell of smoke on their clothes, or they will be like the dog that returns to its vomit, and allow themselves to be dissipated in the pollution of the world from which they had been delivered.

If, however, we successfully navigate the wilderness (the mechanism of which I will discuss in a later chapter), we will exit from it and be carried by the Spirit into the “Promised Land”. There we will know the way of maturity and perfection in the way of righteousness. Now, residing in the Promised Land does not mean that we will no longer be subject to trials, or have opportunities to fall short, but it means that we have learned to trust God to provide answers to meet any challenge that we may face in life. When faced with a trial, the Promised Land Christian does not murmur, and talk about how well he had it when he was in the world. Nor does he grow faint or lose hope, but he finds the promises of God in His word and he holds fast to them with all of his strength, and he does not waver in his confessions of victory. You’re having trouble in this area you say! That’s because you are in the wilderness. If you’re carnal-minded, and have no self-control, your word is no good, and you’re subject to fits of anger and wrath, you suffer from periods of depression and worrying, you are (you guessed it), in the wilderness. Some things should be getting pretty clear by this time. One of them is that you can’t possibly lead anyone else to the Promised Land if you don’t know where it is yourself.

Now let me sum up this chapter by listing the sequence of events regarding the wilderness experience.

1. You get born again.
2. You get Spirit filled.
3. You are led by the Spirit into the wilderness.
4. You spend between forty days and forty years in the wilderness, enduring temptations, trials, and tests.
5. You will either die in the wilderness, or exit a mature Christian: one who is battle hardened, and fully armed with the word, and ready to be a warrior for the cause of the Gospel.

These milestones must be completed in sequential order. No substitutions are allowed. In addition, there are no shortcuts or bypasses. Everyone who has ever been acceptable to God has had to endure this right of passage, including the Lord Jesus Himself. If He didn’t escape this challenge, do you think that you will?

So then, I would say that you should pay particular attention to chapter four, so that you may be prepared to successfully navigate the treacherous terrain found in the wilderness.

Chapter 3: How Do I Know if I am in the Wilderness?

Now that you have further insight into the workings of the wilderness, you can clearly see that it is not necessarily the most desirable place to be. One might, at this time, ask, “Well teacher, how do I know if I am in the wilderness?” This is no doubt a serious consideration since, if you don’t know that you are there, you won’t be diligent to seek the way out. The most reasonable way to approach the answer to this question is to take stock of your life. Inasmuch as the wilderness is designed to rid us of carnality and unbelief, it stands to reason that if you are afflicted with these things, your address is somewhere in the wilderness. In order to answer this question, you must be willing to be honest with yourself. Are you prone to outbursts of wrath? Do you whine and complain about your station in life? Do you doubt the word of God? If you answer yes to any of these questions, then you are either in the wilderness or else, not yet having been filled with the Spirit; you are in the infancy of your Christianity.

Let us look again to our brethren amongst the children of Israel for wisdom in this matter. When they were in the wilderness, what were some of their exploits that put them at odds with the Lord? After a few days in the wilderness, they ran out of water, and instead of looking steadfastly to the Lord for provision, they began to murmur, and talk of how much better they had it in Egypt. Even after the Lord provided them with both water and manna to sustain them, were they satisfied? No! They whined and complained some more, this time about not having meat. They chose to doubt the ministry of the Lord, rather than to trust Him to sustain them. Their testimony was not Jehovah-Jireh, which is to say, “the Lord who provides”, but “Is the Lord among us or not?” In all of this, the anger of the Lord was kindled, and they all died in the wilderness. In the book of Hebrews we find the reason that they did not enter into His promised land was because of unbelief. (Heb. 3:19)

If you find that your behavior is similar to these, you can be assured that you too are falling short in faith, and without faith it is impossible to please God. Moreover, if your life is not pleasing to God, it is a safe bet that you are in the wilderness.

Chapter 4: The Key to Successfully Navigating The Wilderness.

Ok, so now that you find yourself in the wilderness, what do you do? I’m sure that you would like your sojourn there to be closer to forty days, than to forty years. Well, in that case, allow me to pass on to you principles that will help you to find your way out, so that you may cross over into victory.

Principle #1: You must learn to apply the laws and statutes of God’s word to every temptation, trial, or test that you may encounter while traversing the wilderness.

The first thing that is glaringly obvious here is that, before you can apply God’s word, you must first know God’s word. Without a knowledge of your covenant, you can never overcome the obstacles of the wilderness, and your fate will be as prophesied by Hosea;

“My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge.” (Hosea 4:6)

Now even if you are familiar with the word of God, if you are not willing to be obedient to it, your fate will still be one of destruction. You can be assured that there is no challenge that you can face in the wilderness that the word has not covered. Remember, that the Lord will not allow us to be tested beyond our ability to overcome, and with each trial, He provides the defense so that we may be victorious. It is important to keep in mind that it is not God’s purpose to destroy us in the wilderness, but to teach us to rely on Him so that He can fulfill His desire to be God to us.

Let me give you a couple of examples of how this principle works. One of the trials that wilderness Christians face may be financial lack. This is usually symptomatic of poor stewardship of their finances when they were in the world. Now when they are faced with a situation where they cannot provide adequately for their own, and they are still immature in their Christianity, they may succumb to any one of several destructive conditions. They may worry and fret. They may whine and complain, according to the manner of the children of Israel. Or, they may even resort to unlawful actions to get money, like lying and stealing. However, the word provides an entirely different remedy for financial lack. In Scriptures that are too numerous to mention, the word commands us to be faithful in giving first, and then, by His mighty hand, we will receive. (Ok, so I will mention a couple of them) Here is what Jesus said in Luke 6:38.

“Give and it will be given unto you, good measure, pressed down, shaken together, and running over, will be placed into your bosom.”

And again it is written.

“Bring all of the tithes into the storehouse, so that there is food in My house, and test Me now in this says the Lord of Hosts, if I will not open up the windows of heaven, and pour you out such blessing that you do not have room to receive it.” (Malachi 3:10)

These are contractual arrangements between the Lord and us. If we fulfill our end of the contract, then God is duty-bound to uphold His word and to fulfill His end. So what then is the end result of obedience to these Scriptures? It is financial abundance and not lack.

Here is another example of applying the word while in the wilderness. Suppose that you find your body under attack by sickness. Now I realize that there are those who think that sickness and disease are inevitable, and are examples of what is common to man. This is not true however. Sickness is always a matter of cause and effect. In volume one of these essays, we found out that sickness and disease are directly attributable to one or more of the following root causes: ignorance, rebellion, fear, or unbelief. The “cure” for what ails you, is to first deal with the root, and then to apply the biblically prescribed method for healing, which is basically threefold. They are the laying on of hands, anointing with oil, and praying the prayer of faith.

These are but two examples among many. But suffice it to say, there is no challenge that you will face in the wilderness that the word of God has not already foreseen, and moreover, has provided a remedy. When you have learned to believe, and to apply the

Scriptures, you are well on your way to trusting God, and enjoying an expeditious exit from the wilderness.

Principle #2: You must recognize that you do not travel the wilderness alone, but the Spirit of God has come alongside to help.

This is a very important fact to know, since sometimes it can feel mighty lonely in the wilderness. Recall how the Spirit never left the midst of the children of Israel during their sojourn through the wilderness. I assure you that the Lord Jesus was not left unaccompanied either, while He was in the midst of the desolate places. In similar manner to these, the Lord does not send His children out into the wilderness until they are filled with His Holy Spirit. As we face each trial and test, He is there to show us the way to win victory over it. In essence then, it is in the wilderness that we learn to hear the voice of God by His Spirit. He is the Comforter that was spoken of by the Lord Jesus in John's gospel. (14:15-18)

Other assets to be gained from the wilderness experience are knowledge and wisdom. These will certainly come in handy for facing life's challenges. It is the job of the Holy Spirit to teach us these things. Consider the following Scripture.

“ Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor have entered into the heart of man the things that God has prepared for those who love Him.”

But God has revealed them to us through His Spirit. For the Spirit searches all things, yes the deep things of God.

For what man knows the things of a man, except the spirit of the man, which is within him? Even so, no one knows the things of God, except the Spirit of God.

Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might know the things that have been freely given to us by God. (1st Cor. 2:9-12)

By this we can see that it is indeed the job of the Holy Spirit to instruct us in who we are in the family of God, so that we might take full advantage of all of our gifts from Him. So no matter how dark it might seem while we are in the wilderness, the Holy Spirit will be there to bring illumination through the deep things of God. He will light our way so that we might see all things clearly, and follow Him as He leads us out of darkness into the light.

Principle # 3: You must understand that the word of God is your map through the wilderness region, and it is the light that will illuminate your way.

The Lord Jesus said concerning His words that they are spirit and they are life. (John 6:63) We may consider the word of God to be much more than a mere collection of nice stories and a book of historical events. You can feel entirely comfortable considering it to be a personal set of instructions to you from the Father. His statutes are designed to help us to live according to His will, so that He may enter into fellowship with us. Then He can fulfill His desire for us, which is to give us a future and a hope.

Principle #4: You must know that when you face tests, they are not of the Lord's doing, but you are falling victim to your own fleshly desires, and evil propensities.

All too often, when we face trials we attribute them to the Lord's doing, as if He stays up late at night thinking of ways to harass us. The danger in this kind of thinking is that such a person will tend to take an attitude that says, "If this is the will of God, why fight it." It is clear that God does not foment evil as a means of testing us, but we are carried away by our own lusts. It is up to us to decide to refrain from evil and to obey the word of God.

Principle #5: You must recognize that others have successfully passed through the wilderness.

This is important to consider when you are in the midst of the trials of the wilderness, since sometimes it seems as though there is no way out. Your situation may seem hopeless and you may be gripped by fear and despair. At that time it is key to remember that others before you have faced similar situations, and the Lord brought them through, and we know that He is not a respecter of persons. What He has done for one, He will do for another.

Chapter 5: The Old Testament Example

The word of God informs us that He delivered the children of Abraham out of Egypt with a mighty hand. This is as we have previously discussed. He tells that, although He had delivered them, He was not at all pleased with their behavior. We were then warned in the New Testament not to follow their example of evil. (1st Cor. 10:1-13) Verse 11 especially jumps off of the page.

"Now all these things happened to them as examples, and they were written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the ages have come."

So, if we can draw parallels between the Old Testament wilderness experience, and the Christian experience, it will help us to understand how this process works. Allow me to present several of these parallels to you.

O.T. The Jews were delivered from bondage in Egypt by God's mighty hand.

N.T. We were delivered from the bondage to sin by God's mighty hand, and conveyed into the kingdom of His Son. (Col. 1:13)

O.T. The children of Israel were led into the wilderness by the Spirit. (Exod. 13:17-22, Num. 9:15-23)

N.T. We are led by the Spirit into the wilderness. (Matt. 4:1)

O.T. In facing many temptations, trials and tests, they learned to look to and trust that God would meet their needs, and they learned to rely on Him for all things.

N.T. In the world we will have tribulations, but Jesus has overcome the world.

O.T. There were many who failed to leave the wilderness, and died there. This was ultimately due to unbelief. (Heb. 3:15-19)

N.T. Many Christians fail to exit from the wilderness and ultimately die there, never having known the complete victory that is theirs in Christ Jesus. This is usually secondary to ignorance or unbelief of the word.

O.T. Having exited the wilderness, the children of Israel entered into the Promised Land, a land flowing with milk and honey. Each man received his inheritance, but due to the continued presence of enemies opposition remained, so many battles ensued to secure the land. These battles were fought and won in the name of the Lord.

N.T. Having exited the wilderness into the “Promised Land” of spiritual maturity; we are in a position to appropriate the promises of God given to us through Christ Jesus. We are however, opposed by the adversary, and must fight the good fight of faith.

Conclusion

In this essay I have shown you how the maturation process works in Christianity. I have made liberal use of the Old Testament example of the Jews’ exodus from Egypt. In studying how they faced the trials of the wilderness, and how God dealt with them there, we gained insight into how He deals with us here in the new covenant. We can now see that there are no flowery beds of ease in Christianity. We will indeed endure trials, and be faced with opportunities to fail. But, we can have full confidence that God has not left us defenseless or without allies. The road through the wilderness is a necessary right of passage for all Christians, but God has given us sufficient guidance that all of us can successfully travel through it if we diligently attend to the things that God has given us as guides. You may strive to shorten your stay in the wilderness, as much as possible, by being willing to let loose of the things that hinder you from growing up spiritually. You will find that it is far better to spend your life as a Christian living victoriously, exploiting your status as a king and priest to our God through Christ Jesus, knowing this one thing: in Him, we are made to be more than conquerors. I assure you that to arrive at such a destination as this, it is well worth the journey. Amen.