

Why The Wilderness?

The wilderness is not a romantic holiday, but where God wants to get you, on your own. Desert is mentioned 266 times in the Bible, about few of us really experience the drastic dealings of God alone. We don't go to the desert by choice. Remember Jesus was impelled, driven there, to be tested by the devil. The power of the Spirit was the fullness of the Spirit TESTED. God tested His children in the wilderness years to humble them, to see what was in their heart, to cause them to live by the proceeding word out of His mouth (Deuteronomy 8:2,3).

Power is for Purpose

God gives the power of the Holy Spirit when His people pursue His purpose. The purpose of the howling wilderness for the children of Israel was to prepare them for promotion, for inheritance, to possess His possessions. Jesus was filled with power to deliver the oppressed (Acts 10:38), to heal (Luke 5:17) to demonstrate Satan's defeat. Philippians 3:12-14 is a great encouragement for those who are gripped with a sense of God's purpose. A free translation could go like this: -

“Not that I have tackled it cleanly or am complete or mature, but follow after the vision God gave me, that I may grip that which God has gripped me for. Brothers, I've added up my figures and the total is not what it should be in terms of God's purpose, but the priority is to forget the past and reach out to the future. I press on, like a long distance runner with my mind on the prize of the upward call in Christ Jesus.”

The wilderness experience will break us AND make us into what God wants. Then we can follow after the vision of God. Today many Charismatics, Pentecostals, word of faith followers etc. realise they are in a spiritual limbo. The freshness has gone, expectations often dashed and doubts emerge. God calls us to the wilderness so we find the power of the Spirit, that we may know it is not of us, but of God. 2 Corinthians 4:7 tells us the truth about the treasure in our fragile, earthen vessels. The word “excellence” means outreachingness. The treasure is inexhaustible, and cannot be fully investigated in this transient life. Yet today the church is often restricted in vision, inward looking, and paralysed by a fear of evangelism. We need an outside-IN mentality that proclaims the church exists for its non-members, the lost who fail to come to its meetings. The wilderness can break the mould of our opinions, our failures, our narrow thinking. The desert experience may have its temptations, but the infilling of the Spirit will be turned to real power as we faithfully go through the testing. Will we go through God's route of wilderness?

There comes a season in a saint's spiritual journey when God confronts us with the place of obscurity and nothingness. Will we remain faithful? Will we allow God to prepare us for promotion? Will we enter the Promised Land of our inheritance?

Those Who Went Before

Think chronologically of those who passed through the desert as an essential stage of spiritual learning. Abraham left civilisation in Ur of the Chaldees, left his father's home and the prevailing moon worship for the desert wanderings. Not

knowing where he went, he lived most of his life in tents. It was a mistake to take Terah and Lot. God called him alone, says Isaiah 51:2. We hate being alone so much, we will do anything to contrive a little fellowship, to be in that meeting, to talk to this one or that one. But God is waiting until we wait; then He will act for us. Abraham eventually got alone in the horror of a deep darkness and God cut the covenant of promises with the father of the faith.

Isaac, Jacob and Joseph were all supremely alone in their deep encounters with God. Joseph had at least 12 years unjustly in prison, where the word of God tested him. Alone. Forgotten by the baker and butler. Forgotten by his brothers. Rejected just like Jesus, yet the work of the Holy Spirit was producing character via an immense patience. Joseph had staying power, the hang-in-there attitude that any world leader would need in a crisis.

In Jacob's life we see most clearly what every Christian today has to confront, self-life. God has to take His children to school in the desert. We have to learn what is flesh and what is spirit and not to refine the flesh. The liberating secret is knowing when He died, I died. The positional truth of Romans 6:6 and Galatians 2:20 must be balanced with the vital truths of 1 Corinthians 15:31, *"I die daily"*, and Philippians 3:10. God touched Jacob at the strongest point where the leg joins the body. If there is no knowing in experience of Romans 6:6 we are hindered from the throne. The lonely night in Genesis 32 was the pivot when the dream of reality for Jacob became the reality of the dream, and a price with God emerged. Today, this education of the desert will bring maturity to leaders. Is it that so many leaders fall because they have never been broken in the strongest part of their flesh-life? When there is no desert there can be no dimensions of the width, length, height and depth of the gospel. Some mock at preaching on the wilderness, but it's there we feel keenly our obscurity and nothingness.

The list of Bible characters must include the O.T. giants, Moses and Elijah, David and Jeremiah, and many more. The children of Israel experienced 38 years of the wanderings, but failed to learn the lessons. In the desert, our flesh-life is exposed that it might be put to death. Egypt was to be replaced by a land flowing with milk and honey, but only the young generation under Joshua qualified for entrance. Our inheritance cannot be enjoyed unless there is deliverance and holiness, says Obadiah 17. In Egypt, God's people could blame Pharaoh.... a type of Satan. In the early wilderness experience they could blame circumstances – no water, nowhere to stay, no certain food. The mercy of God provided a table in the wilderness. At Mount Sinai and after, God was shut in with His people. They had no excuses. They needed to see the state of their own hearts. The resistance in their hearts was exposed, and the writer to the Hebrews uses this to warn new covenant saints:

"For who, having heard, rebelled? Indeed was it not all who came out of Egypt, led by Moses? Now with whom was He angry forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose corpses fell in the wilderness?"

- Hebrews 3 : 16,17

For 14 months God lead Israel from Sinai to Kadesh Barnea, which was only 11 days from Canaan. But they went to Edom and the plains of Moab for 38 years. The wilderness is not supposed to take that long! But unbelief and disobedience delays the people of God.

God takes us out of the way, into the wilderness to learn things of the Spirit. In the New Testament, John the Baptist and Paul learned the lessons. One great

lesson to stand in awe of the ineffable name. To learn we are the reverse of what Almighty God is. To learn how holy God is. How corrupt we are. This has to be a revelation and not the condemning power of the law, which only inspires self-effort. Some Christians have formed an image of God that is wholly false; they see Him as a tyrant. We should serve Him out of joy and gratitude. Do we enjoy or endure our religion? The wilderness will test our image of God. If we are obedient we discover a fresh revelation of God. I'm so glad God is not like me! The Holy Spirit can reveal the gap, and prompt our hearts to praise and worship. He can convict us of our rebellion, pride and unforgiveness. The desert is where we get right with God, where the power of brokenness makes us new.

Revelation of the Word

"... The word of God came to John, the son of Zechariah in the wilderness." - Luke 3:2

"Therefore behold, I will allure her, will bring her into the wilderness, and speak comfort to her." - Hosea 2:14

It's not gospel for God to free us from sin, in order to please ourselves. To fulfil His purposes we must hear His voice and obey. To hear accurately the proceeding, prophetic word from the mouth of God takes time. We are in a keen contest against principalities and powers, which is associated with the desert period of our lives. Lilith, the female monster of the night will come to those deeply seeking God, and we must know our victory in Christ Jesus (see Isaiah 34:14). The prophetic word is precious and the enemy will resist and attack you on this crucial point. That's why so many think God has spoken, obey, and yet no lasting fruit remains. Deception is an epidemic in charismatic circles, especially among leaders, who have failed to repent. That failure has led some to premature death. Are we going to spend time in the wilderness or risk a ministry with no death to self, doctrinal error, and possibly disgrace?

The word of God came to John in the wilderness. The power of that word drew Jerusalem, all Judea, and all the region to him (Matthew 3:5). The trouble over Jerusalem (Matthew 2:3) was evidently a spirit of fear that closed in on Herod at the news of Jesus' birth. The prophet's intercession set that city free to come to hear the living word of repentance. People today talk of revival in Lewis in 1949 – 51, but it never touched Stornaway! Perhaps there was no prophetic intercession discerning the knowledge of specific evil spirits over the town.

The supply of the Spirit quickening the word of God must sustain those who are going through the wilderness season. The Hebrew church needed Hebrews 10 : 35 – 39. They had gone through a wilderness of suffering and bewildering loss. Paul says to them, ***"Don't discard your outspoken statement because your salary is coming."*** Your strong declaration of faith has a great payday! The temptation in the desert is to throw away your faith as something that cannot help you. Unbelief, the worry-power that the devil will succeed stalks everyone who walks in the God-appointed wilderness. Or think on the words of Hebrews 10:23-24 where we are exhorted, ***"... to hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering for He who promised is faithful."*** ***"And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works."*** To hold fast is to embrace tightly the downward revelation of God. Our confession is to say the same thing as God is saying to you personally, for to feel the same way as God does, or the thought life corresponding to the mind of Christ.

The revelation of the word, line upon line, precept upon precept, is to bring us into union with God. The true mystic desires to be joined to the Lord to be one (or the same) spirit as Him (see 1 Corinthians 6:17). In the wilderness sway from the pressure of normal living we have our most precious commodity – time – to hear, study and meditate upon the word of the Lord. We have 1,440 minutes a day and about 1,000 are taken up with work and sleep! Add to that travelling, eating, family life, TV, and the phone, on average most believers give less than 60 minutes to God. No wonder Western Europe has the shadow of the Antichrist falling across its nations! Know the time spiritually! Get awake, and be prepared, and BUDGET your time. The lost live for the weekend – that’s how eternal they are! Lovers of God must live for something more than church on Sundays. Consider wilderness and the drastic dealings of God where precious souvenirs of solitude will adorn your lifestyle as you exhibit deep-seated peace, love, and joy to those around you.

Remember God does nothing except He tells His servants, the prophets! Will you pay the price to be a prophetic person? When the Lord God HAS SPOKEN, says Amos, who can but prophecy? The revelation word must be spoken back to God by prophecy; and this becomes our confidence in the trial, the danger, the long difficult period of waiting upon God. Come to the rendezvous of rest, where God will speak tenderly to your heart, where the Holy Spirit will be your daily coach training you in righteousness, where the word of God will yield new secrets.

Drastic Dealings

The wilderness for David was the realm of the really real. At the cave of Adullam the two questions for his ragamuffin followers were:

do you like the captain?

do you mind living in caves?

For 8 years David would now flee from Saul. God would teach him the Kingdom of God in higher terms. 1 Samuel 25 is the pivotal chapter, where Abigail intervenes and prevents a massacre, with an astounding word of wisdom (vs. 28 – 31):

“Please forgive the trespass of your maidservant.” (The humility here in stark contrast to David’s hurt pride and revenge of verse 13). ***“For the Lord will certainly make for my Lord an enduring house, because my lord fights the battles of the Lord, (he was just about to fight a Saul-type battle), and evil is not found in you throughout your days. Yet a man has risen to pursue you (Saul is no more than a mere man), and seek your life, but the life of my Lord shall be bound in the bundle of the living with the Lord your God, and the lives of your enemies He shall sling out, as from the pockets of the sling. And it shall come to pass, when the Lord has done for my Lord, according to all the good that He has spoken concerning you, and has appointed you ruler over Israel....”***

She goes on to imply that stopping the projected bloodshed will cause God’s people to see that King David is different in character from Saul. This matter of the Kingdom has essential relevance today. God puts spirit and flesh kingdoms together so His people can choose the better way. In the wilderness, David began to see the Kingdom in higher terms. No longer revenge but mercy. No longer the folly of haste but wisdom. No longer pride but humility. Abigail is a wonderful example of women’s ministry, and David recognised it, later, taking her as wife. Bracketing this chapter 25 are two instances where David has opportunity to destroy Saul. He refuses

to touch the Lord's anointed, allowing God to take the ultimate issues for both men: Ziklag and Endor. David gets to his lowest point before the Kingdom where his men mutiny. Saul goes into the occult. The last nine chapters of 1 Samuel are the desert teachings of Christ to the future King. Moses had his Midian, Paul the Arabian desert, Elijah knew Cherish and Zarephath, and most prophets know the wilderness of drastic dealings from God.

Jeremiah was still a teenager when the call of God came bringing such an area of conflict...a message that would be hated and refused, no wife to share his melancholy, imprisonment, a protracted martyrdom. The desert prophet experienced the wilderness of not being listened to. The political, social reforms of Josiah could not prevent the Captivity, because the inner heart change failed to materialise. Heart repentance is the route for living waters to flow again. Israel did not ask for the ancient (timeless, eternal) paths, but rather feigned obedience. God had to deal drastically by exiling them for 70 years. Jeremiah was an assayer, testing the quality and strength of God's people, but declaring them "*rejected silver*". Where are the Jeremiahs today? Men who will pay the price in the desert for the burning power of God's word to make religion vital, victorious and valid to a materialistic society again. The tension in this great book for preachers, is his fidelity of God's Word with the feelings of his own heart because he was a lover of men (Jeremiah 17: 16). The desert is the place where the dealings of God marry us to the purpose of God and life us beyond our emotions, our ideas, and our will power.

Temptation in the Wilderness

The wilderness season includes temptation because our faithful Father tests our faithfulness. What the Father tests, the enemy will tempt in that area of our lives. In the wilderness know that Jesus Christ is the merciful High priest able to succour us. The pattern was appetite (body) in Luke 4:3, ambition (soul) in Luke 4:6 and advertisement (spirit) in Luke 4:9.

In two of the temptations Satan ruthlessly attacked the identity.... If you are the Son of God. With us also the enemy hates the privilege of our position in Christ Jesus. Our new creation identity is a threat to the Kingdom of darkness – and in the wilderness more than anywhere else – the enemy comes to destroy our dignity. Tied up with our identity is our destiny. The purpose of Jesus was to win the world, but not by the fatal compromise of Satan's method by submitting to worship him. Much work for the Lord today fails to go the crossroad to resurrection. God cannot improve me, He must remove me for a fuller receiving of the divine life. The wilderness is where this action begins.

The third temptation concerns lifestyle - will I use spiritual gifts to conform to public expectation? Jesus walked as a DEAD MAN

to self interest (the bread)

to compromise with Satan (the nations)

to popular demand (the temple).

To know the abiding love of the Father we must die to the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life.

In John's Gospel there is no mention of temptation because the writer is proving the deity of the Son of God. The difference between Matthew and Luke are consistent with their portrayals of Jesus – in Luke, Jesus is priest, the temple concludes the temptations; while in Matthew Jesus is King therefore the mountain and

kingdoms completes the order. He was tested as the Son of God and therefore the magnitude of the temptation was much greater for him than for us. However, the essential pattern of being lured away from the Word to follow the spirit of the world is the same. Remember, the devil is never, never, never in control of the situation. To preach or write about his methods is to know the enemy, not glorify him.

Many teachers today disregard the wilderness teaching, but without its cleansing and purifying under the hand of the Lord, these very same leaders can fall into pride, immorality or financial sins. There is wisdom in a stop – start ministry where the leader leaves for an exile to seek the Lord, or takes a simple job outside preaching to listen again the ordinary people. Allow God to speak to you about the barrenness of a busy life and the busyness of a barren life and set your heart to wait on the Lord.

After our Lord's temptations – including “every temptation” (Luke 4:13), He was conscious of the mighty anointing to set the captives free, to preach the gospel to heal the broken-hearted. In driving the car we sometimes have to reverse in order to move forward. To fast from telephone, TV, friends and even church life can do wonders when the Lord has authored it.

A Place of Dependence

In Revelation 12:14-17 we glimpse the refuge God provides of the remnant Church in the days of Tribulation. Yes, in the end-times, there will be a desert for His hidden ones. Nourishment and protection are promised for those who resist the adversary steadfast in the faith. The “**adversary**” literally means anti-righteousness, the enemy who hates and opposes all righteousness, with violence, rage and destruction. Hence the word, “**enraged**” with the woman. A recent prophecy welled up in my spirit along these lines, while spending time in Lewis.

“The times are coming when My people will no longer be free to fellowship on Sundays. As the shadow of the Antichrist spreads across Europe My people who are in the liberty in the Spirit will be directed as Joseph who preserved the holy child by dreams. You will learn of Me in the night seasons and will need your minds, imaginations and heart cleansed by the power of My blood. For I see into the minds of My people and there is filth, unbelief and many things against My kingdom. Those who repent, abandon themselves on My mercy, and surrender their lives to My Lordship, will dream dreams and be led to fellowship at night. I will preserve those who repent. In the days of the Antichrist, know there is a place of safe retreat, your spirit, where My Kingdom dwells.”

Being in a wilderness; whether an actual desert, or boring workplace, or Broken marriage through betrayal, or financial loss, or bedridden sickness; it is the place of a new dependence on God. Jesus could not do what He wanted! He could do nothing of Himself.

The wilderness period in our lives is where we learn a new dependence, being Abba's children, certain of the Father's voice, but uncertain of everything else. This critical inner knowledge must be developed NOW in the Body of Christ...we need to know the good Shepherd's voice and be spiritually sensitive. Our destiny is vested in a personal relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ through His Word. The desert is

refusing to rush in; refusing to listen to good advice when it's dark, i.e. no personal revelation; refusing to produce an Ishmael. Isaac was born of "dead parents". Embrace the desert discipline of dependence, and our own nothingness. Perceive the El Shaddai God, the All-Sufficient One who alone can produce the Son of God in you!

Salvation Comes Out Of The Desert

"The wilderness and the wasteland shall be glad for them, and the desert shall blossom like the rose...." - Isaiah 35:1

A modern fulfilment concerns Israel, who by transforming the desert, has become the second greatest world exporter of citrus fruit.

There are many applications of this principal. The most striking is the children of Israel leaving the wilderness for the promised land. Deuteronomy 8:11-16 sketches their 3-stage development as God's people. This chart helps us to see the essential transitional zone of the wilderness.

Egypt	-	Slavery	-	Victims
Wilderness	-	Sanctification	-	Validity
Promised Land	-	Service	-	Victors

Modern preaching attempts to persuade us we go from victims to victors at the new birth or baptism in the Holy Spirit. The wilderness period is given by the God who will test us. Even Jesus knew it in the temptations. He went to the desert in the power of the Spirit (Luke 4:1), and returned in the fullness of the Spirit (Luke 4:14). We gain our validity in the desert. The children of Israel had to learn holiness and the law pointed to the need to be a separate people. Holiness was taught in Leviticus in three ways: sanctuary, sacrifices and Sabbath (including feasts). There are two religions in the world:

- (a) Making God like man (idolatry)
- (b) Changing man that he becomes like God (Christianity).

We must be born again, redeemed from the market place of sin never to be sold there again, BEFORE WE BEGIN to appreciate the character of God. In the desert of a boring job, a broken relationship, or serious sin, if we are faithful to the truth, we will grow in grace towards maturity. The desert truth of what I am has been crucified to the Cross and gains power in our lives when we realise the depths of the old man. When we are born again the first Adam life does not automatically die. Some rejoice in the positional truth of Romans 6:6 and Galatians 2:20, but will we go through what it means to die to self? Will we embrace the wilderness? Those who are willing and obedient will eat the good of the land.

In the desert, the great principle is WARFARE before WELFARE.

In Deuteronomy 7:1 the names of the nations in Canaan that were to be conquered are filled with meaning:

Hittites = ***terror, fears***
Girgashites = ***strangers, occult spirits***

<i>Amorites</i>	=	<i>talkativeness</i>
<i>Canaanites</i>	=	<i>dealers, deceivers</i>
<i>Perizzites</i>	=	<i>squatters</i>
<i>Hivites</i>	=	<i>pleasure seekers</i>
<i>Jebusites</i>	=	<i>crushers, tread down</i>

The desert experience is where we get set free from self and demonic bondage, in order to be victorious in the promised land, where we must use the sword of the Spirit, in aggressive warfare. Remember in the three stages of development of God's people, now as then, that the divine method of redemption and warfare differs: the blood cleanses us from sin, but the word of the Cross applies His victory over evil spirits.

Egypt	-	the blood, the Red Sea
Wilderness	-	the Cross or Judgement
Promised Land	-	the name of Jesus under the anointing of the Spirit using the sword of the Spirit

The blood of the Lamb cleanses from all sin and sets us free from the curse of being in Satan's Kingdom. In the desert, however, it is the power and wisdom of God, the Cross that does the holy work of subduing the flesh as we yield to God. After the river of Jordan we use the sword of the Spirit, the living word of God, to overcome the principalities and powers. For victory we must enjoy our state of being in the character of Jesus Christ our Lord – the essence of using His name. Secondly, we must be anointed, refusing to rely on the flesh. These essential lessons of warfare are learnt in the desert. Truly, salvation comes out of the desert, where character is formed by the leading of the Spirit. Rivers in the wilderness can spring forth speedily!

Let God Love You

Psalm 23 has the context of the desert. The testimony of trust and triumph comes beside still waters, without fear, lying down in green pastures, being led in paths of righteousness. The valley of the shadow of death is literally the lengthening shadows in the Dead Sea canyons at 5pm when leopards, snakes and scorpions come out of hiding. Accepting His acceptance often comes when we are laid aside, with time to examine our hearts and meditate His Word. Let God's presence come and love you again in this rendezvous of rest. Come apart, before your nervous system comes apart and health fails. Clarity of mind and deepening conviction comes to those who make the desert a priority.

“He found him in a desert land and in the wasteland, a howling wilderness; He encircled him. He instructed him, He kept him as the apple of His eye.” - Deuteronomy 32:10

God's love for His children is white-hot passion, a gut reaction that lurches toward his children. The matrix or womb of Calvary love reaches out. He takes us to the desert to love again with His deep love – but first we must be loved by Him. I remember being cast aside in solitude for several weeks in the Outer Hebrides and one afternoon after a week of tearful desperation I put on a tape by Bernard Hull. It restored my soul and up from the central depths I poured out a prophecy, which was encapsulated by the presence of Jesus. That was the turning point – back to usefulness, with a new use of destiny to serve God's people. He will encircle you and make you know you are precious. The Bible became alive again – so vital for the preacher who must hear and obey and minister the creative word.

By duty, by work we become so easily the centre of our universe. But the earth goes round the sun. The believer must orbit the Son of God and never the other way around. He is not a God to fulfil your expectations. The desert training, God's spiritual boot camp, teaches us to see the man-centred gospel as superficial. As a mystic of old said: ***“So many walk in the path of what Jesus purchased for them at Calvary; but He is looking for those who walk the path of the Cross.”*** Present risenness of Jesus Christ IN you and THROUGH you depends on that narrow path that leads to life. The internal kingdom must be established for the external victory in the promised land. God, create a new breed of Christian worker! Men and women who know their identity and security in Him alone, and walk the path of self-renunciation. Let God love you amid the souvenirs of solitude in the desert.

Will you go and experience:

Drastic dealings?
Encircling experiences of God's love?
Souvenirs of solitude?
Exorcism of enemies?
Rendezvous of rest?
Tender talkings of Christ?

When God appoints the desert in your life, let Him love you enough to kill you. This is the central reason for the wilderness. In Song of Songs 3:7,8 we read, in the context of Christ and his church about the sixty valiant ones who surround Solomon's bed. That bed is the place where the Kingdom is within you, your spirit, where Jesus rules. These soldiers are armed to fight and slay all aspects of self-praise, self-righteousness, self-defence, self-interest. Flesh must be killed off as an active force that plans our Christian life. All our presumptions and soulish expectations must be destroyed. He abases and humbles you in the desert. The “fear of the night” is the darkness of flesh activity. God wants His Bride to have no part dark. His love wants to enter our weakness to kill off self. He is calling the remnant to desert dealings. Before the great and glorious victories in the Promised Land, where we fight the ites in His power and strength. Will you be prepared for promotion by accepting the wilderness?